

First Comes Love

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With the battle against Ragyo and the Life Fibers won, Akio Takahiro and Ryuko Matoi face their toughest opponent yet: settling down. Follow Akio, Ryuko, and the rest of the gang as they deal with the ups and downs of a regular life. Sequel to Before My Body is Dry.

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Life: Take-two

Author's Notes:

Hey everyone! Welcome to the sequel of Before My Body is Dry!

First things first, if you haven't read Before My Body is Dry before coming here, you don't have to worry TOO much. There will be some important parts you missed, so I encourage you to go back and read it, but you don't have to.

With this story we'll get to the OVA, and then some stuff I have planned after. Expect some serious stuff at the start, but as this story progresses I plan on it being much more relaxed than my first one. I also imagine that this story will progress for the foreseeable future, as it doesn't have much of an end game really. At least not now.

So, sit back, relax, and enjoy some more bits from the lives of Akio Takahiro and Ryuko Matoi!

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Two weeks later...

"No! No, no, no! Stop!"

Ragyo sneered at Akio's cries, his anguish and helplessness only fueling her.

"A-Akio?" His father, Hiroshi, gasped, his eyes meeting his son's. "Is that you, son?"

Akio tried to move, but he couldn't. His feet were locked in place, stopping him from going anywhere. That was to be expected, after all. He had been here before. He knew how it always ended, but that didn't stop him from trying to prevent it. Maybe if he tried a little harder, said something a little different, tried something else, maybe his parents wouldn't meet the outcome he was ready for.

Two tendrils of Life Fibers snaked towards the unsuspecting forms of Kasumi and Hiroshi Takahiro.

"N-no," Akio choked out. "D-don't! Not again!"

He knew what happened next. It was like watching a movie. He could only sit and watch as the inevitable happened, over and over.

Without warning, the tendrils shot towards their necks, coiling around them and squeezing.

His parents cried out in surprise and pain as they were hoisted into the air, their legs dangling beneath them as they fought against the nooses around their necks.

They wouldn't last long. He knew that.

He knew that.

Akio met his parents' eyes one final time. He never wanted to look into them, but each time he was compelled to. His body would always disobey his wishes.

Both of his parents were looking directly at him, they're faces surprisingly calm as they struggled to breathe. Their eyes shone with unshed tears as they watched their son.

As always, in these final moments, the fear of death left their eyes, and was replaced with something else.

Something softer.

Something warmer.

Something that Akio didn't understand.

Ragyo snapped her fingers, the sound mirrored by the cracking of their necks.

Akio woke in a sweat, his eyes wide as he gasped for air. It was *that* dream again.

Slowly sitting up in his bed, he placed a hand over his heart to calm its rapid beating. It was like a tiny hammer was slamming against his ribcage.

"God damn it," Akio cursed silently, running his other hand over his face to try and wipe away the rampant emotions.

It was the same dream. Each night, he had had the exact same dream. It'd start at the beginning of their battle with Ragyo Kiryuin and Nui Harime, and would always end with the death of his parents at the hands of Ragyo herself.

He was like a specter in these dreams, always watching and never acting. No one would even notice him till the end, and then it felt like the entire world would be watching him.

Akio shivered, the image of his parents' eyes imprinted on his brain. As much as he might try, he'd never forget that look they had given him just before Ragyo snapped her fingers and the Life Fibers broke their necks.

Needless to say, the past two weeks had been very rough. The deaths of his parents had hit him very hard, and coupled with the task of trying to settle down again, things had been quite tough for Akio. It wasn't exactly like he had ever 'settled' down before.

A day hadn't gone by where he hadn't thought about his parents, and a day didn't go by where those thoughts didn't affect him. While he hadn't exactly been that close with Hiroshi and Kasumi for most of his life, the small time he did have with them he cherished. He loved them and they loved him. There was a once time when he thought that once the war was won, he'd go and live with them for a few weeks. Just him, his sister, and their parents. All of them together, doing family stuff. Like having dinners, going on picnics, maybe even going fishing.

That wasn't possible anymore, though.

Honestly, if he were alone, he probably would have locked himself in day one. Just shut the bedroom door and never leave. But he wasn't alone, so he couldn't. He had to be strong, and not just for himself. He wasn't so dense that he didn't realize that.

He had to keep going.

Taking a few deep breaths, he shook his head, his eyes inevitably landing on the empty space beside him. It hadn't been so bad when Ryuko had stayed over the first few nights. At least then he had someone to comfort him as he tried to go back to sleep. But, as these things go, her time was split between Akio, the Mankanshokus, Satsuki, and even herself. Akio hadn't been the only one to lose someone two weeks ago, after all. He wasn't the only one who was grieving.

Akio's eyes widened, mentally kicking himself for nearly forgetting his sister.

Pushing himself out of bed and placing his feet on the floor, he walked across the large bedroom and towards the other bed in the corner.

That was another reason why Ryuko didn't sleep over after the first two nights. Akiko hadn't been able to sleep alone in her room.

So, the two of them decided it would be best to have Akio bring her bed into his room, and then two could share it, which left them with the arrangement they had now. Akio preferred it this way. At first, he had been afraid to even look at his sister in the eye, let alone be in the same room with her. Thankfully, Ryuko had been able to talk some sense into him, quickly and convincingly.

"You're the only family she has now, you idiot!" Ryuko had shouted at him when he mentioned the idea of sending her to live with someone else. *"There's no way you're going to dump her off on someone else! Damn it, the two of you need each other. Now more than ever!"*

She had been a little blunt about it, but she needed to. Looking back on it now, Akio was ashamed with himself to have even put forth the idea in the first place. What kind of brother would he be if he didn't take care of his little sister?

Akio sighed in relief when his eyes fell onto the five year old. She was sleeping, but it would be debatable on if it was peaceful or not.

Her small arms clutched onto a lion teddy that was half the size she was, her long, brown hair spilling over top of it. From the way her eyes were twitching, Akio could tell she was dreaming.

It had been clear off the bat that Akiko had taken their deaths very hardly. Harder than Akio, to no surprise. To the little five year old, Hiroshi and Kasumi had been her entire life. At this age, the two of them were essentially all she had; and now they were gone. Ripped away, just like that.

The first four nights were the roughest. Poor Akiko hardly had any tears left in her as the fifth morning came around. The only bright side of it all was that she was eating and sleeping.. She was beginning to settle down a tiny bit, but the giant hole still plagued her heart. It would take ages to heal, but she was learning to cope with it. She was learning to live with it.

Just thinking about it made guilt bubble in his chest.

Sitting down carefully on the smaller bed, Akio reached out and brushed the hair out of her eyes and behind her ears.

"I'll make it up to you some day, princess," Akio murmured.

After his talk with Ryuko, it became clear as to what he should do: he'd become her legal guardian and raise her himself. He was over eighteen, so he was legally an adult. He had an amazing support group. The Mankanshokus, his brother, Ryuko, Satsuki, and hell, even the Elite Four and Tsumugu were all right behind him. It was a huge undertaking, but he knew it was the best for all parties involved.

Money wasn't a problem either, thanks to the *huge* final check he had gotten from Nudist Beach- which actually came as quite the surprise to him. Apparently his brother, Aikuro, had never filed all the paperwork for his quitting. It just never registered. So, all of the paychecks he had missed, as well as a hearty bonus, was all piled into one, fat lump of cash. It would definitely allow him and Akiko to live comfortably for a very, very long time.

Thank God that Takarada loved throwing his money around. Akio needed it now more than ever.

Akio's hand lingered on his sister's cheek before he sat up, his eyes glancing over to the clock on the wall.

6:30 AM.

He might as well get up now. It wasn't like he was getting back to sleep anytime soon.

Coming to his feet, he walked briskly out of the shared bedroom, yawning as he walked.

First things first. The bathroom.

Moving into the bathroom directly across from their bedroom, Akio closed and locked the door, turning on the lights.

The first sight that greeted him was his ragged self in the mirror.

Akio frowned as he examined himself, making himself look even worse.

His brown, unkempt hair was all over the place this morning, nearly hiding his bright green eyes.

Bringing one hand up to his face, he slowly traced the three grooves that marred the right side of his face.

Akio's teeth grounded in his mouth as he felt the rough scars. He hated looking at them, he hated feeling them, he hated everything about them. Ryuko seemed to like them, but Akio couldn't get over them. Partnered with the bags under his eyes, they made him look at least ten years older this morning.

They were just a visual representation of the injuries he received during his seemingly never ending battle against Ragyo and the Life Fibers. Every time he looked at himself, they would always be there. They would always remind him of his mistakes.

Shaking his head, Akio moved about to do his morning routine. He brushed his teeth, washed his face, combed his hair, and used the toilet, then left the room as quickly as he had entered.

Walking into the kitchen, he flipped on the lights, then moved to the coffee maker and turned it on.

As he waited for the coffee to brew, he took a quick glance around the suite around him. Only hours after the battle had ended, Satsuki had offered Akio one of the spare Three Star accommodations for him to use. School wasn't over, after all. They still had a month till the end of the term.

Even though it was one hell of a generous offer, Akio refused and haggled her down to a One Star suite. Living in the mansion that was a Three Star suite would just be too much for him and Akiko. With it only being the two of them, the home would probably feel more empty than anything, and neither needed that. The suite's that the One Stars lived in, however, was perfect. They weren't too small, but they weren't too big either. A living room, three bedrooms, two bathrooms and a kitchen. That was more than enough for the two of them.

Funnily enough, she had even offered the Mankanshokus and Ryuko one as well. Unsurprisingly, they all turned it down immediately. It just wasn't their style.

Turning back to the coffee pot, he grabbed a mug and poured himself a cup, lightly blowing on it before he took a small sip.

Opening up the fridge, he decided he'd go light on breakfast today. It was a big day, after all. It was Akiko's first day at school.

She should have been attending kindergarten awhile ago, but with everything that happened she just didn't get the chance. So, Akio felt it best to enroll her in the school here for the time being. It'd give her a chance to get out of the house and interact with the real world, and hopefully get her mind off things.

On his end, Satsuki had given him the option to take time off as he recovered from his injuries and gathered his thoughts. At first, Akio thought better of it, but as time went on he decided it was for the best. Aikuro was his teacher, after all. It'd be easy for him to catch up, especially with Mako and Ryuko both in the same class.

Grabbing some eggs from the fridge and pancake mix from the cabinet, Akio set out to whip up a breakfast consisting of scrambled eggs and pancakes. Couldn't go wrong with those.

"I wonder if we have any bacon," Akio mumbled to himself, scratching his cheek.

He reached for the fridge door, when the sound of knocking stopped him.

Knock, knock, knock!

Akio raised an eyebrow, his eyes moving back and forth from the door to the clock. It was still before seven. Who the hell knocks on someone's door before seven?

Grumbling to himself all the way, Akio paced over to the door, opening it up before the stranger could knock again.

"Morning, Akio," Aikuro greeted with a smile, walking past Akio and into the apartment behind him.

"Hey, Aikuro," Akio grumbled, slightly annoyed that his brother had just barged in. "What can I do for you this morning?"

"Oh, nothing," Aikuro said as he walked into the kitchen, grabbing the coffee pot and pouring himself a mug. "Mind if I have some?"

"Oh *please*, help yourself!" Akio rolled his eyes as he followed him into the kitchen. "Do you want some of *my* breakfast, too?"

"Yeah, that'd be great," Aikuro turned to him with a smile, mug in hand and completely oblivious to his tone. "Thanks."

Akio sighed and continued to cook, this time making enough for two. How very much like his brother. While he acted like the leader he was when he worked for Nudist Beach, he was somewhat aloof and easy going when it came to his personal life. The teacher persona that he had put up for so long had finally bled through a little bit, even more so now that he was back to work at the Academy.

So, inviting himself to Akio's breakfast wasn't much of a surprise for him. Not that it really bothered Akio in the first place, but he wouldn't be a brother if he wasn't slightly annoyed.

"So, why are you really here?" Akio asked as he poured some pancake mix onto a skillet. He knew it was more than just 'nothing.'

"Just checking up on you," Aikuro shrugged and took a sip from his mug. "I wanted to make sure you were settling in alright."

Akio nodded, his previous bad attitude dissipating some. Both of them knew there was more to it than that. For that, Akio would always be thankful.

"Yeah, well. I've been doing fine, but thanks for coming out here to check up on me."

Aikuro returned the nod, his eyes drifting towards the food Akio was preparing.

"... There's only two pancakes," Aikuro noted with a frown.

"Yep," Akio chuckled as he flipped the first one. "Don't worry, one of them is yours. Some of the eggs, too."

"What about you?"

Now it was Akio's turn to shrug.

"I'll eat later. I'm not very hungry right now."

Aikuro's frown deepened, this going unnoticed by Akio.

"Akio-"

"Hey, would you mind taking over for me?" Akio turned to him and jerked a thumb towards the bedrooms. "I'm going to go wake up Akiko."

Aikuro sighed, but nodded nonetheless and took Akio's spot at the oven. It wasn't like he could say no.

Akio walked briskly past him, letting out a sigh of his own once he had walked out of sight.

Walking back into the bedroom he had only left thirty minutes prior, Akio walked over to Akiko's bed, sitting back down on its surface as he moved to shake his sister's shoulder.

"It's time to wake up, Akiko," Akio whispered as he shook her softly.

Akiko began to stir, her eyes slowly fluttering open and taking in the half lit room around her.

Her eyes finally landed on her brother.

"Good morning," Akiko greeted with a yawn as she pushed herself up in bed.

"Morning sleepy head," Akio smiled and tousled her hair. "Ready to get up?"

Akiko looked like she wanted to say no, but instead nodded. Her tired and baggy eyes definitely didn't agree with that.

"Good," Akio continued to smile at her, hoping somehow his mock good mood would rub off on her. "Today's a big day, after all."

Akiko turned her head down to her lap, a slight frown gracing her lips.

Akio's brow furrowed in worry, his head tilted to the side as he tried to get a better look at her face.

"Is something wrong?" He asked after a brief pause.

Akiko shook her head, but didn't lift it.

"That doesn't look very convincing, you know."

"Can't I just stay here with you?" Akiko mumbled without lifting her head.

Akio's smile faltered. By all means, that was a valid request. But Akio knew better. Staying in the house all day was no way to live. She needed to go out and experience the world. Have fun, make some friends. A five year old shouldn't have to stay here with him all day.

"You wouldn't want to stay locked up with me all day," Akio laughed and patted her on the knee. "That'd be super boring. Besides, I hear that the kindergartners get to play games all day and do a bunch of other cool stuff."

Akiko finally peaked up at Akio, her eyes a little more hopeful.

"Really?"

"Really, really. I was a kindergartner too once, you know."

Akiko's face brightened, but immediately darkened when another thought struck her. Raising her hands palms up, she looked to them, and then to the rest of her body, before looking back at Akio.

"What if they don't like me?" Akiko whispered, a few hints of tears coming to her eyes.

Now Akio really frowned.

Damn. These types of self-destructive thoughts weren't thoughts that a five year old should be having.

"Not like you?" Akio said as he stood and looked down at her, placing his hands on her hips. "Are you kidding me? They'll love you!"

Before Akiko could reply, Akio reached down and grabbed her by her armpits and lifted her into the air.

"H-hey! B-brother, put me down!" Akiko giggled as she smacked at his arms. A smile broke out on her face as Akio lifted her higher into the air, making Akio himself feel lighter than air. If she could enjoy herself, even for just a second, Akio would feel like he was on top of the world.

"Nope!" Akio laughed and placed her on his shoulders. "I'll only put you down when you agree to come have breakfast and go to class, where you'll meet lots of wonderful people and make some wonderful friends."

"And what if I never agree?" Akiko hummed as she patted his head like a drum.

"Then I guess you're staying up there. I hope you don't mind doing boring grown up stuff with me. Maybe I'll even go to the library today... Oh! I know! We can go and get our teeth cleaned!"

"Ew!" Akiko giggled and stuck out her tongue. "Okay, you win! I'll go."

He knew that would do it. Who honestly likes going to the dentist?

"That's the spirit!" Akio cheered and walked towards the door. "Now, let's go get some breakfast, and then you can get dressed for your big day."

Akiko let out another giggle and nodded, her legs dangling over Akio's shoulders as he walked into the kitchen to have breakfast with his brother.

It was a start.

Akio lazily browsed the day old newspaper in front of him as he nursed his coffee, his attention divided between the words in front of him and the conversation beside him.

"And what about lunch? How do they do lunch?"

"There's a big cafeteria that everyone eats in," Aikuro answered as he chewed on some scrambled eggs. "You get your food on a lunch tray, and then you sit down and eat."

"Really?" Akiko's eyes widened, causing Akio to smile over his paper. It was nice to see her excitement starting to build.

"That's right."

They had been on like this for the entirety of breakfast, Akiko asking the school questions and Aikuro answering. Occasionally Akio would chip in with an answer or his thoughts on something, but honestly he was pretty content to just listen to them talk. It felt... normal. Like a normal family breakfast.

He couldn't help but cherish it rather than take part in it.

"What do they have for lunch?"

Aikuro opened his mouth to answer, stopping when he realized he didn't actually know.

"... Well, when I was still in grade school, they'd usually just serve day old pizza or soggy hamburgers," Aikuro chuckled after a moment of reflection.

Akiko tilted her head to the side, her lips moving as she mouthed the foreign words.

"And what's that?"

Aikuro blinked at her, his mouth opening slightly in a stunned silence.

"Just because your school served western food, doesn't mean they all do," Akio informed Aikuro before he turned to Akiko. "Hamburgers and pizza are just popular fast food choices."

"Oh. Well, I've never had any."

"Really now?"

"Nope," Akiko shook her head. "Mom and Dad say that I... shouldn't... eat junk food."

Akiko slowly trailed off, turning her head down to her plate as she finished her sentence.

Akio closed his eyes and cursed to himself, his brain immediately kicking himself for continuing down that line of questioning.

"Well, how about after school today, Akio and I can take you out for a burger," Aikuro grinned. "It'll be a treat for finishing your first day."

Akiko looked up towards Aikuro, her face somber before a her lips slowly tugged upwards into a smile.

"Really?"

"You betcha," Aikuro nodded and glanced Akio. "Isn't that right, Akio?"

Akio looked back and forth between Aikuro and Akiko, before nodding himself.

"Right," Akio murmured.

Akiko smiled and turned back to her breakfast, her expression looking a bit more bright now than it did seconds before.

Making eye contact with his brother, Akio mouthed a silent 'thank you,' to which Aikuro only waved off.

If it wasn't for these people, he'd be so screwed. Akio was doing his best, but when it came down to it he really didn't know what he was doing. He was only trying to emulate what he saw his adopted parents do, or what he saw families do on TV. He still had a lot to learn.

"You better go get dressed if you don't want to be late," Akio commented as he glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Oh, right!"

Akiko hopped out of her chair, trotting her way back to her room to get dressed.

With her out of the room, Akio unconsciously let out a sigh of relief.

"Akio."

Akio shook off his thoughts and looked to his brother, who was watching him now with a worried expression on his face.

"Are you sure you're alright?" He continued, his tone dripping with seriousness.

"Of course," Akio deflected and opened back up his newspaper so he could pretend to read.

Aikuro rolled his eyes, reaching across the table and snatching the newspaper out of Akio's hand.

Akio's eye twitched, his nostrils flaring slightly in anger at the action.

"This is serious, Akio," Aikuro continued, waving the now folded up newspaper at Akio.

Akio reached out and tried to snatch the newspaper back, only for Aikuro to raise his hand and keep it out of reach.

Growling and plopping back down in his seat, Akio crossed his arms and turned his head away.

"... I'm dealing with it," He finally admitted.

"Why don't you just have Satsuki handle the funeral arrangements like she offered?" Aikuro asked with a shake of his head. This wasn't

the first time the two discussed this. "This is just too much to ask of you."

Akio's expression faltered, his eyes darkening for a fraction of a second.

"Because, they're my family, Aikuro. I have to do this."

"Well, what about your grandparents? Shouldn't they be a part of this?"

Akio winced and turned his head, making sure that Akiko wasn't listening in.

"Our grandparents on both sides have already passed," Akio answered in a hushed whisper.

"What?" Aikuro gasped, his eyes widening. "How is that possible? Kasumi and Hiroshi were only in their late thirties, I thought."

"They were," Akio nodded, his eyes turning down. "I tried looking them up, but they were already deceased. Mom's parents were old when they had her, and they both already passed of old age, while Dad's parents both died in a car crash when he was in his early twenties, along with his younger brother."

Akio sighed, running a hand over his face his face and through his hair.

"Other than a few aunts and uncles and a couple of cousins, we were all they had."

Aikuro frowned, leaning back in his seat. That had not been the answer he was expecting, but it should have been. He should have known this already. Now he felt foolish that he didn't.

"Well..." Aikuro began after a few seconds of silence, taking a moment to think of what to say next. "At least promise me you won't

stay cooped up in here alone. Go over to the Mankanshoku's. Invite Ryuko over. Hell, at the very least meet up with me for lunch."

Akio gave a mirthless smile, nodding along with Aikuro's suggestion.

"Sure thing, brother. I'll do that."

Aikuro stared long and hard at the eighteen year old from across the table, but he didn't say anything else. If Akio wouldn't follow his suggestion, then there was nothing he could do about it.

Knock, knock, knock!

Akio perked his head up at the sound of someone at the door.

That's right. Mataro had offered to walk Akiko to school for her very first day.

"Akiko!" Akio raised his voice as he stood and moved for the door.
"Mataro is here!"

"Coming!" Akiko shouted back from her room.

Akio reached for the door handle, opening it up to reveal who he expected. Mataro, Mako's younger brother.

However, he was accompanied by someone he didn't expect.

"Ryuko?" Akio blinked at his girlfriend, surprised by her presence.

Ryuko was wearing her usual get-up now that Senketsu wasn't with her: a black jacket with white sleeves over her plain white shirt, with a red neck tie tied around her neck. She wore a black short skirt, that only went down to about the middle of her thighs. Her black hair was the same as it always was, coming down to right around her shoulders, the red streak running through it as prominent as ever.

"Hey, Akio," Ryuko smiled as she strolled up to him, giving him a quick kiss on the cheek before moving past him and into the

apartment.

"What are you doing here?" Akio asked, his eyes following her as she moved to the table he was once sitting at and taking his spot.

Mataro rolled his eyes and walked in as well, his presence completely forgotten.

"Nah, I'm cool," Mataro grumbled and walked over to the couch in the living room and throwing himself down on it. "Totally cool. How was my morning? Well, it coulda been worse I guess, thanks for asking!"

Akio pretended not to hear his younger friend's snarky remarks, his eyes still trained on Ryuko, who was now leaning back in her seat with her arms behind her head.

"What, am I not allowed to come visit my boyfriend now?" Ryuko narrowed her eyes at Akio, but the slight smile that tugged at her lips made it a lot less threatening.

Akio sighed and shook his head, but couldn't help but smile a bit too.

Aikuro especially looked pleased with the situation, a victorious smile plastered on his face as he looked back and forth between Ryuko and Akio. Looks like he got his wish.

"Well, of course you can," Akio mumbled, scratching the back of his head. "But, don't you have-"

"Alright, I'm ready!"

Akiko came walking back into the room, wearing the familiar white and blue of the school's required outfit and a black backpack on her back. Her long hair was tied into a ponytail, a look that he had never seen on his younger sister.

Akio's confusion faded away when he looked to her, replaced with a warm feeling in his chest and a smile on his face. She looked

positively adorable.

"You look great," Akio said and walked up to her, getting down on one knee and brushing away one of the wrinkles on her shoulder. "You ready for your big day?"

"Hmhm," Akiko nodded happily, surprising Akio. It was nice to see that her initial fear had disappeared.

"Good," Akio smiled and patted her on the head as he rose back to his feet. "Make sure you thank Mataro for walking you to class, okay?"

Akiko tilted her head to the side, looking around Akio and to Mataro who was still sitting on the couch.

"Thanks, Mataro!"

"No problem," Mataro replied, lazily waving her off as he too came to his feet. "We better get going, then. Sis will have my head if I'm late again."

"She's not the only one," Ryuko smiled dangerously at Mataro, causing him to gulp.

"R-right," Mataro stammered and briskly walked to the door. "L-let's get a move on then, then."

"Alrighty then, have a good day, princess," Akio told her as he gave her a kiss on the head. "I'll see you after school, and then we can go get that burger to celebrate. If you need anything during the day, just give me a call, okay?"

Akiko nodded and walked over to Mataro.

Akio glanced over at Aikuro, motioning to the two kids with his head.

"Why don't I walk with you kids to school?" Aikuro asked as he pushed himself to his feet, quickly catching onto Akio's unsaid

request.

"Thanks, Uncle!" Akiko smiled and held out her hand, which Aikuro took in his. Akio was very amused when he noticed Mataro's shoulders slump a little.

"And we'll see you two later," Aikuro gave Ryuko and Akio both a farewell nod before he moved towards the door.

"Bye, Akio!" Akiko waved at her elder brother happily as she followed Aikuro close behind. "See you, Ryuko!"

"Have fun," Ryuko grinned and waved.

Akio waved back, smiling broadly as he watched Aikuro and Akiko walk out the door with Mataro right on their heels, closing the door behind him.

"It's good seeing her with a smile on her face," Ryuko noted, voicing exactly what Akio was thinking.

"Yeah," Akio replied distantly. "Wait..."

Akio blinked a few times, shaking the thoughts from his head and turning to Ryuko and raising an eyebrow.

"Shouldn't you be heading to school, too?"

"Eh," Ryuko shrugged and leaned back in her chair, letting an arm drape over the backside. "I thought I'd skip today and keep you company."

"If you skip you'll fall behind, you know."

"Oh, gee, thanks *Mom*," Ryuko rolled her eyes. "Please. You know as well as I do that we're just cruising until the end of the year."

Akio pursed his lips and nodded, albeit begrudgingly. That was true. From what he had heard from Aikuro, the end of the year schedule

was pretty lax. Basically just lectures, without any other real work to do. No quizzes, no tests, no nothing. He knew that Satsuki probably pulled the strings to make it that way, as surprising as that might sound. It was probably a way of congratulating the student body while rewarding them for their hard work.

Either that or Satsuki and the others just didn't have a plan for the end of the year. That was very possible. It wasn't like there were any assurances that there would even *be* an end of the year.

"Well, I don't want to condone inappropriate behavior..." Akio began slowly before a smirk formed. "But, I suppose I can allow it this once."

It wasn't like he never skipped class, either. Plus, he knew that Ryuko was worried about him, and that made Akio feel better. It was nice having her here when he really needed it. Despite her brash and blunt nature, she was actually very caring and gentle when she wanted to be.

"Even if you didn't allow it, I'd still be here," Ryuko scoffed and kicked her feet up on the table to lean further back in her seat.

"Yes, I know," Akio said as he sat down in the chair beside her, pushing Ryuko's feet off as he did so.

Ryuko huffed and put her feet back up on the table, this time Akio not caring enough to push them off again.

"So, what have you got planned today?"

Akio sighed. "The usual."

Ryuko frowned for a fraction of a second, but tried to remain neutral.

"You've been working on *that* for a few weeks now," Ryuko said. "Is there really that much left to do?"

"Not really," Akio shook his head. "I just need to call the people and set a date."

"That's it?"

Akio nodded. "Yeah, why?"

The two maintained eye contact for a few moments before Ryuko blushed and looked away, her right hand playing with her hair.

Akio slowly began to grin, recognizing that reaction anywhere. He hadn't noticed it before, but now with them returning to their normal lives Akio noted that Ryuko often played with her hair when she was feeling sheepish about something. Maybe it was because she was treading in unfamiliar territory, or maybe she had a shy side that Akio wasn't aware of, but he had seen it a few times now. Maybe it's always been there, but Akio could swear it was a habit she was only just now picking up. Regardless, it was cute.

"Did you have something in mind?" Akio smirked.

"Not really," Ryuko shrugged and looked up at the ceiling, her voice dropping a decibel as she got to the embarrassing part. "I was just thinking that maybe we could spend the day together?"

"Ew, really?"

Ryuko turned to look at him, her eyes blinking rapidly while her mouth fumbled around for a response.

"Kidding," Akio smiled and grabbed her hand. "I'd love nothing more."

"Dick," Ryuko growled, her hand crushing around his. "Was that really necessary?"

"No, but it was fun," Akio answered, doing his best to hide his wince.

"Well, as long as *you're* enjoying yourself."

Akio chuckled and rose to his feet, bringing Ryuko with him.

Honestly, he could probably use the break. He didn't want to become one of those people that get so wrapped up in the bad things that they forget about the good things.

He promised himself that he wouldn't get to become one of those people.

"So..." Ryuko began and looked around the empty apartment before looking back to Akio. "What do you wanna do?"

"Well, we *are* home alone."

Ryuko's blush deepened, her eyes widening at the implication.

"I-I mean, yeah, we are, b-but that's a pretty big step and- well, I don't know, I guess if you're ready for something like-"

"Huh?" Akio tilted his head to the side and rose an eyebrow. "I was thinking about going and taking a nap. I'm still pretty tired."

"Oh... ooooooooh, okay," Ryuko nodded, a little bit too excessively perhaps. "Yeah, right. Napping."

"... Right..." Akio replied slowly as he tried his best not to laugh. "So, would that be alright with you?"

"Yeah, I can just watch TV or something," Ryuko answered a lot more calmly.

"Great," Akio grinned and lead her over to the couch.

For a cat nap like this, he'd prefer the couch. Plus, it was placed in front of their flat screen TV so Ryuko could watch TV while he napped. The couch itself was pretty nice, too. It was long, blue, and very cushiony. Definitely large enough for two people, and definitely comfortable enough for a quick nap.

The One Star suites had some really nice accessories. Back in his dinky little apartment with Aikuro they didn't even have a small television, let alone an actual couch. Compared to his living arrangements in the past, this place was like an extravagant heaven.

Plopping himself down on the couch, Akio handed Ryuko the remote as she sat down beside him.

"You mind if I lay out?"

Ryuko shook her head as she pointed the remote at the television, pressing the power button to turn it on.

Akio grinned and laid out on the couch, positioning himself so that his head was in Ryuko's lap and his legs were stretched out.

Ryuko giggled and rested a hand on Akio's head, absently playing with his hair as she flipped through the channels.

"You really should take a shower," Ryuko noted with a smirk as she curled some hair around her finger.

Akio winced, this going unnoticed by Ryuko.

To be frank, he simply forgot to. He washed his face, but he didn't think to take a shower. Whoops.

"Yeah, probably so," Akio yawned and wiggled around to get more comfortable. "So, anything exciting happen in my absence?"

"Nah, not really," Ryuko replied, her eyes still glued onto the television. It looked like she had settled for the Discovery Channel. "Although I heard Jakuzure's father is coming to town to visit."

"Really?" Akio rose an eyebrow.

"Yep. Don't know why though."

"Huh. Anything else?"

"Hmmm," Ryuko pursed her lips as she thought. "Oh, yeah! Sanageyama and Satsuki are having a duel later today."

Akio blinked. "A duel?"

"Uh-huh," Ryuko nodded and glanced down at him. "You wanna come watch with me?"

"Sure thing," Akio grinned. "As long as you don't mind me sleeping a few hours first."

"Just so you know, it makes it a lot harder to fall asleep when you talk so much."

"And here I was, just wanting to talk with my wonderful girlfriend," Akio feigned a hurt look, placing a hand on his heart. "My poor heart. No one appreciates me!"

Ryuko giggled and bopped him on the head with her knuckles, then moved her hand back to fiddling with his hair.

Akio laughed and turned himself on his side so that he faced away from the television and towards Ryuko's stomach. Even though they were joking, she had made a solid point. Kind of hard to fall asleep when you keep talking.

Ryuko only giggled a bit more, her eyes glancing down at the boy in her lap.

Seeing the smile on his face made her smile, too.

They all could use a little break now and again.

Besides, it'd be fun to go and watch her sister duke it out with that green haired chump.

Author's Notes:

So, there ya have it!

This chapter was basically an introduction to the story, obviously. It sets up some of the stuff from the future, as well as gives some info on the characters and the world.

Anyhow, I hope you all enjoyed it! Next chapter we'll get to the OVA!

Thanks for reading everyone! Until next time!

The Student Council President

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of First Comes Love!

Boy, this chapter took a really, REALLY long time. I won't lie to you, I had a very trying string of months from around November to May, but things are finally starting to clear up. I'm starting to write again, and actually feel good about it all. I must have had three different drafts of this chapter before I finally settled on this one. I do apologize if I'm a little rusty.

I really didn't want to leave my story the way it was. You all have been so kind and patient with me. I had almost given up on really writing anything again, but then I saw the updated TV Tropes page for my story, and reread all of the reviews, and I felt that spark come back. I hope I can get back to a steady pace of writing, and I really do apologize for the wait with this one.

I want to see this through just as much as you all!

So, without further ado, enjoy!

Stretching his arms out above his head, Akio let a loud yawn escape his lips. It was one of those nice lengthy ones. One that brought tears to his eyes and made his ears ring.

He had gotten a lot of sleep the night before, but he was still tired somehow. It must have been his sleep debt from the past few years or something.

It was still hella early, though.

"So, when are they starting?" Akio whispered, finally putting forth the question that had been bugging him for the past five minutes. They

had been standing here for at least ten minutes in agonizing silence. It was finally getting to him.

"Soon enough," Ryuko answered, her eyes trained on the two stationary duelists in front of her.

Akio rolled his eyes and shifted his gaze away from the two stationary figures to examine his surroundings for the umpteenth time as he waited. It was the only thing he could really do to pass the time.

To his left stood Ryuko, her hands shoved in her jacket pockets as she watched her sister and Uzu Sanageyama stare each other down. Her glare was unwavering, as if a slight change in her expression might disturb the silence. Akio doubted that her expression would change at all until the fight began. Her silent vigil was impressive, really. Never had Akio seen her so attentive. To be honest, it was quite a feat for the girl. No one would dare admit it, but she had the attention span of Mako.

To his right stood Gamagoori, followed by Inumuta and then Nonon. Each of them matched Ryuko's level of attentiveness, but that was to be expected. Satsuki was their leader, and Uzu was their comrade. The Elite Four were nothing if not loyal. They wouldn't dare break concentration in the presence of their leader.

None of them seemed to care about Akio's presence, however. In fact, they were completely indifferent towards it. It was comforting, in a way. It was kind of like he was just one of them now.

And finally there was Mako, standing directly beside her best friend Ryuko. Compared to the others, she was the most spacey. Her eyes were just like Akio's- wondering around the surrounding area, but a lot less analytical. Mako probably didn't have an analytical bone in her body.

The Academy grounds itself was still a destroyed mess. Chunks of debris still littered the area, along with torn up dirt and several

craters from the previous battles. The grass that was still living was long overgrown, and most likely would stay that way. The walls that surrounded the Academy were broken down in many places, as well as the Academy building itself. The damage caused by the conflict with Ragyo had yet to be repaired, and in the end would probably never be. They only needed the area to finish of the year. Aesthetics didn't matter much at this point.

The only thing that was actually still standing were the dozens of barbed pillars that filled the courtyard. Not a very comfortable school environment, to say the least.

To wrap things up, Akio's eyes landed on the two duelists.

Uzu and Satsuki were currently engaged in a stare down of the ages, neither one moving an inch. Each were just waiting for the other to make the first move, but neither did. Both were dressed rather loosely, as any other type of clothing would hinder their movement. Uzu himself had settled for just a pair of pants, while Satsuki decided to dress in a white robe.

The rules of the duel were simple. First hit won.

The way that Akio saw it, it could really only go one of two ways. The two would either exchanged blows for several seconds until one side proved victorious, or one of them would get a winning hit in within moments. Both were skilled enough to do both.

Having fought with both of them though, Akio was very slightly leaning towards Uzu. With his eyes and his swordsmanship, he was a very tough opponent. Satsuki was just a huge question mark to him. He had never fought her without the use of Life Fibers.

But then again, Uzu was kind of predictable. He *did* like to scream out where he was attacking.

"So, he's still dead set on a duel with Lady Satsuki," Inumuta finally broke the silence.

"That's his way of getting closure," Gamagoori replied.

That's right. Uzu and Satsuki had dueled once before, with Satsuki winning with one swing. Akio knew that Uzu could never live with himself leaving that unsettled, which was probably the basis of this duel today. He had to know one hundred percent that he had lost, and it wasn't just some fluke. His pride wouldn't have it any other way.

I wonder if I'm next, then.

Nonon gave an exaggerated sigh and shook her head. "Men are such a pain in the butt."

Akio smirked and looked back to the two. From the looks of it they were getting ready to fight after having exchanged a few words.

"Here I come!"

Pushing himself off the ground, Uzu pounced towards Satsuki.

"MEN!"

The first body part he went for was the head. Typical.

Satsuki stepped backwards and allowed Uzu to approach, opting to simply block his first strike instead of trying to retaliate.

It was a game of chess now, and Uzu was on the offensive.

"Men! Dou! Kote! MEN, DOU, KOTE!"

After his initial strike, Uzu dealt another half dozen in the blink of an eye. His speed was downright impressive, while his strength was nothing to scoff at either. Akio didn't know how it happened, but he had no doubt that Uzu had far surpassed him now. With sight returned to him, Uzu was a force to be reckoned with.

Satsuki blocked each strike, her feet slowly moving backwards as Uzu got the upper hand.

Akio's eyes widened slightly. Uzu was getting the upper hand, and right off the bat too. Hell, he even saw Satsuki wince!

"MEN, DOU, KOTE!"

Uzu's strikes increased in speed and ferocity, forcing Satsuki even further backwards.

In a fight as short as this one, having to resort to defending and backing away was never good.

"Lady Satsuki-!" Gamagoori gasped.

"-Is being overwhelmed?" Inumuta finished for him.

"No way!" Nonon exclaimed, equally surprised.

"Pull yourself together, Satsuki!" Ryuko shouted, having finally broke free from her trance.

Akio couldn't help but grin, even with the intensity of the situation. It was somewhat funny watching their varying degrees of reactions. Especially seeing Ryuko root for her newfound sister with such passion.

He also couldn't help but feel bad for poor Uzu, though. No one was rooting for him.

"Let's go, Sanageyama!" Akio cheered. "You've got more than that!"

Uzu continued to rain down hits towards Satsuki, but each one was repelled. With each hit dealt and blocked, the scowl on Uzu's face began to grow. His emotions were getting the better of him. She wasn't fighting back.

"There's no need to hold back, Sanageyama," Satsuki spoke plainly.

Uzu grimaced, but kept on.

"Of course not! I'm gonna beat you, Satsuki Kiryuin!"

Raising his wooden sword above his head, Uzu swung down with all the force he could muster.

"MEN!"

Satsuki watched as the strike came closer, not moving an inch.

If Akio had blinked, he would have missed it.

With one quick movement, she struck. Her wooden blade cut through the air, slamming into Uzu's wooden sword and breaking it in two as if it were nothing but a twig.

Akio whistled. Now that was impressive.

Uzu gaped at his now broken sword, his eyes as wide as saucers.

"H-how?!"

Satsuki took a deep breath and walked past Uzu, creating distance between the two before turning back to him.

"Get another sword."

Uzu sighed and straightened his back, his head shaking slowly.

"No. I lost this duel, fair and square."

"Is that so?" Satsuki smiled and closed her eyes. "Well, it was a good match. You have my thanks."

Giving a bow of gratitude and respect, Satsuki turned on her heel and began to walk away.

That's it?

After all that build up, it was somewhat disappointing that there would only be one bout.

Akio's eyes followed Satsuki as she walked towards where he and Ryuko were standing. He couldn't place it, but something felt off about Satsuki. She didn't hold that usual... fire, so to speak. She seemed like just another normal eighteen year old today.

The Elite Four and Mako all sprung towards Uzu as he drew near, presumably to say he could have done better, or even less likely to congratulate him.

"What's the matter, Satsuki?" Ryuko asked as she got close. It seemed that Akio wasn't the only one to notice. "Are you all right?"

Satsuki walked past Ryuko, stopping beside her shoulder.

"Now that we've defeated Ragyo, Honnouji Academy has fulfilled its purpose. It will be shut down in a month as planned," Satsuki spoke, her voice raising as she prepared to address her Elite. "I leave the rest to you, my Elite Four."

With that, Satsuki walked past them.

Mako gasped, her eyes bulging and her jaw dropping as she watched Satsuki walk away as any *normal* person would.

"Hey! Lady Satsuki wasn't shining! She didn't smack her heel into the ground, either!"

"Hmmm," Akio hummed to himself, his eyes still watching Satsuki as she walked away.

He just never expected Satsuki of all people to be in a funk like this. She was always so determined, her eyes always on the prize, headstrong as all hell. Now that her task was finished, she didn't have anything else to fight for. She was having troubles adjusting to a life in without constant conflict. That was a very difficult hole to

climb out of for an eighteen year old with a past as messed up as hers.

Akio exhaled slowly and glanced over at Ryuko. What did she make of all of this?

Surprisingly, she was already staring at him expectantly.

"What's up?" He quirked an eyebrow.

Ryuko's eyes darted to Satsuki, then back to Akio. She even opened her mouth to say something, but shook her head as if she had changed her mind on the matter.

"Nothing," She mumbled and walked off for the group around Uzu. "Come on, let's go congratulate the jock on his loss."

Akio blinked a few times and watched her walk away. He was dumbstruck. It wasn't every day that you saw Ryuko Matoi not speak her mind. As of late, there could only be one thing that would get her to doubt herself.

"Nothing, huh?" He repeated quietly to himself, his eyes watching the lone figure of Satsuki in the distance.

I take it she's just as worried as all of us.

The relationship between the two girls was still very hit or miss at the moment. Satsuki acted very nonchalant about the whole ordeal, even going so far as to call Ryuko 'sister,' once or twice. Akio was actually somewhat surprised by her attitude towards it. Considering the two's past, one would think that Satsuki wouldn't have been so readily accepting of it.

Ryuko was just as accepting, but a lot less sure of herself. And in the strangest of manners, might he add. If the two girls were together, just chatting about God knows what, she was fine; her usual brash self, even. It was like the two were just old rivals that had become

friends. But, at the even mention of the two being sisters, she would clam up and look all nervous. It was a sight unaccustomed to Akio. He was so used to seeing Ryuko as... well, Ryuko. It was strange seeing her so awkward like that. She probably just needed to warm up to the whole idea, but it was certainly a sight.

Even though Ryuko didn't say it, he knew what she had wanted to ask. It didn't take a rocket scientist to connect the dots.

Akio turned and walked not towards Uzu and the others, but towards the retreating Satsuki. He had a score to settle with her, so it wasn't like he was just doing it for them. Satsuki had saved his ass back when they were in that cage, it was only right to try and return the favor. Of course, giving someone a pep talk was far from 'returning the favor,' but it was the least he could do.

It wasn't a long walk Honnouji Academy. The academy's tower still reigned over the school, towering high into the sky like a beacon. Just like before, it could still be seen from a distance, and it was still just as impressive. It was the symbol of the academy, and it was still standing strong through thick and thin. Akio liked to think it was a testament to what they were able to accomplish.

However, up close, it wasn't nearly as impressive. The walls of the mighty tower were crumbling away, revealing the building's innards and foundations. Not even the tip of the tower could escape that damage. The areas that still remained were colored a grimy, grayish color, which was sort of unsettling to look at. If one were to look closely at the structure, they would probably be able to notice the way in which it was leaning slightly to the left. That was uncomfortable.

It was slightly sad to see the building in such a shape now, but it wasn't time to get sentimental. Akio had one priority today.

Akio entered the academy at a slight jog. Being back in his old school brought back numerous memories, but he pushed them to the

back of his mind.

"Now, let's see..." He whispered to himself as he jogged. If he remembered correctly, the elevator that took you up to Satsuki's quarters was a few hallways away, guarded by a locked door.

Sure enough, after a few minutes of jogging, the locked door he was looking for came into view.

Smirking to himself, Akio walked up to the keypad and punched in the code. The last time he was here he had come with Gamagoori, and with fingers as large as his it was pretty easy to see what buttons he had pressed. Akio made sure to take note of it at the time, thinking that it might come in handy someday.

It was a little weird that there were no guards this time, though. In fact, he barely saw a soul in the hallways on the way here. The place was basically a ghost town.

Akio proceeded down the hallway after the door opened. At the very end of it, as expected, was the elevator that he was looking for. One more code and he'd find himself at the doorstep of Satsuki's quarters.

Unexpectedly, however, was that there was a familiar face walking towards him.

"Fukuroda?"

The boxing club president blinked dumbly at him, looking nearly as dumbstruck as Akio. Akio almost didn't recognize him without his two star uniform on, hence most of his confusion. Now he was just wearing boxing shorts and a white t-shirt.

"Takahiro," Fukuroda greeted with a nod, the overhead lights reflecting off of his bald head. "Can't say I was expecting to see you here."

"Likewise," Akio agreed. Of all the people he might have run into, this guy was on the bottom of his list.

What's he even doing here, anyways?

After their fight oh so long ago, Akio had very little dealings with the bald little man. As he recalled, the last time he had even seen the guy was the day of final battle with Ragyo. To be quite frank, Akio had nearly forgotten the guy existed before that day. It was sad, and made him feel kind of guilty, but that was the way it was. They had once been club partners, but now they were just unfamiliar acquaintances.

"What- what are you doing here?" The boxer stammered. He too seemed caught off guard, unsure of what to say.

"Oh, you know," Akio shrugged. "Gotta talk to the head honcho. You?"

"Just finished. End of the year club finances and all that."

"Ah, makes sense."

"Yeah."

The two entered an uncomfortable silence. Neither really had anything to say to one another.

"Soooo," Akio rubbed the back of his head.

"Yeeeeeah," Fukuroda nodded slowly with pursed lips. "Well, it was good seeing you."

"Y-yeah, you too man," Akio smiled. "Tell Hakodate I said hello."

"Sure thing," The club president chuckled and walked by him while rubbing his head. "I'd ask you to do the same, but I doubt Matoi would want to hear from me."

"Probably not," Akio laughed and walked towards the elevator, punching in the required code.

The elevator made a binging noise and the sign above it lit up, signaling that it was moving down to the ground floor.

Akio glanced behind him, watching as his former club partner walked away.

"Life is full of surprises, huh."

Satsuki's quarters hardly changed a bit since Akio was here last. The marble-tiled hallway to her room was the same as it had been. It was seemingly untouched by the events with Ragyo, which came as a surprise to him. It was comforting, however. It was nice to see that somethings hadn't changed. And of all things, of course it would be Satsuki's living space that would remain unscathed. There might be some symbolism there, but Akio wasn't one to look for that type of stuff.

Akio took a deep breath to ready himself as he walked towards the ornate double doors at the end of the hallway. Satsuki was probably waiting behind them, lounging in a chair and drinking a hot cup of tea. He honestly couldn't imagine her in any other way. What else would she do in her free time? Read? Write poetry? Those *sounded* like things she might do. Now that he thought about it, did she even *have* any hobbies? Akio knew next to nothing about Satsuki. He only knew her as the cold, strong dictator of Honnouji Academy. He knew nothing about Satsuki the person.

In fact, he knew next to nothing about any of Satsuki's posse, other than the fact that they were presidents of clubs and committees. I mean, it was pretty obvious that Uzu liked sports, or that Nonon liked music, but he really didn't know anything deeper than that.

Shaking his head with a sigh, he placed his hand on the wooden door and gave it a shove. Now wasn't the time for this line of

thought. He could amend that later.

As he walked into Satsuki's room, his previous sense of familiarity vanished. The room he had entered was only a chilling remnant of what it once was.

The wall to his right, which had once been made of glass, was completely gone. It looked like Godzilla had come through and tore a great big chunk out of the room. There was still a beautiful view of the school below, but it was a little more eerie now that there was no wall to separate them from it. So much for remaining untouched.

The room itself was covered in dust and dirt, probably caused from the destruction to the wall. You could actually see the particles of dust float in the air with some help from the sun. With just one look you could tell that no one had even bothered to give it a cleaning, which was disconcerting.

But I guess with a side of the room completely missing, there wasn't much point.

Nothing familiar looking stood out. There were no paintings on the wall, no expensive looking vases in the corner, no candles hanging on the walls, not even the familiar face of the tea-making butler. It was like he had entered some alternate realm.

The only thing that remained were the two lounge chairs, both of them were pointed towards the missing wall.

Satsuki sat in the chair farthest from him, her eyes listless as she looked out to the horizon. She had now changed back into her old school uniform, and was wearing a blanket around her shoulders to stave off the cold night air that was returning.

This was a rare moment for Akio. He had never seen the president in a state of reflection. Whenever he had thought of her, one image always came to mind. The strong, silent student council president. Not the reflective eighteen year old. It only added to the strangeness.

"I like what you've done with the place," Akio deadpanned and sat down in the vacant seat beside her. "It's a little drafty, but nice nonetheless."

"Can't beat the view," Satsuki replied with a straight face, not startled at all but Akio's presence. "It can get a bit chilly, though."

"No kidding," Akio scoffed, resting his foot on his knee. "I imagine the air ventilation is a little off with a wall missing."

Satsuki smirked slightly before immediately growing somber again.

"Why are you here, Akio?"

"Whoa now," The man in question feigned being hurt. "You're not even going to offer your esteemed guest tea first?"

"Here you are, sir."

A little plate with a teacup on it appeared like magic in front of Akio.

"What the-!" Akio jumped in his seat, looking up to see the smiling face of Soroi hovering over him.

Damn, he's good!

Looks like somethings haven't changed, at least.

"Th-thanks," Akio mumbled and accepted the offered drink. It looked like his secret wish for another cup of Soroi's delicious tea would be granted.

"And for you, milady," Soroi said and handed Satsuki some tea as well.

"Thank you, Soroi," Satsuki dipped her head then took a reserved sip. "Wonderful as always."

Soroi bowed and stepped away, leaving the two alone once more.

"So," Satsuki began and looked over at him. "What do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"Oh, you know," Akio shrugged and took a sip of his drink. "Just thought I'd drop by and see how you were doing. It's been awhile since we've last spoke."

"I suppose it has," She admitted. "I am well, thank you."

Akio furrowed his brow. In his experience, when someone answers with a simple 'I'm good,' it usually means there's something else beneath the surface. It's the ones that don't have much to say that are truly troubled. If she were more than 'well,' she probably would have stated as such.

"Settling in okay?"

"As well as I can."

Akio had to give it to her. She didn't even flinch, she just took it all in stride. There were no holes in this wall she had put up. If he didn't know any better, he would have assumed she was a-ok.

But he did know better.

"You can't fool me, Satsuki," He spoke quietly, but with an air of confidence. He wasn't here for just idle chit-chat.

Satsuki met Akio's gaze, evaluating him. Neither of them blinked for several moments.

Akio knew that with someone with Satsuki, it was better not to skate around the subject. She wasn't the type of person to like indecisiveness or weakness.

"Or anyone else, for that matter," He continued and took another sip of tea. "We're worried about you."

Satsuki silently sipped from her tea, her eyes lost in thought. That was *not* the reaction he had been expecting.

"Worried about me..."

She made a thoughtful sound, the words leaving a new and strange taste in her mouth. Worried? About her? A month ago she had led these people, but now that feeling was gone. Of course, her friends would still treat her like royalty, but what royalty did she really have now? Not that she disliked this change, so to speak, it was just different.

"Yeah," Akio nodded. "I don't know if the others would ever voice this concern, because you know, you're you. They care for you deeply, but I couldn't imagine them having this chat here with you."

Satsuki quirked an eyebrow, and glanced over at the man.

"Why are you here, then?" She repeated the question once more, but this time she was actually curious.

Wasn't it obvious?

"You saved my life," Akio laughed a mirthless laugh. "You tell me why I'm here."

Satsuki nodded, but said nothing and the silence returned. Akio wondered if he had overstepped his bounds, but soon enough Satsuki shifted in her seat and spoke.

"Yes, well," The president began again, her eyes once again moving to the outside world. "I do suppose things have been different."

"Difficult?"

"I wouldn't say difficult," She replied. "Just different."

"There has been a lot of change," Akio agreed quietly. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.

"It's hard to get used to it all," Satsuki continued, finally allowing herself to open up a little. "It still feels like we're battling against my mother, even though I know she's gone. She's no longer here, but I still feel her burden weighing down upon me. I can't say I really know what to do with myself now."

"Not used to the life of an eighteen year old, eh?" Akio smirked.

Satsuki snorted and shook her head, but she didn't look particularly upset at Akio's comment.

"Like you wouldn't believe."

Akio blinked, slightly taken back. He wasn't prepared for such honesty from her.

It was true though. He couldn't imagine Satsuki had much free time with the life she had. Ragyo was insane, her father, who had actually cared for her, was gone, and her entirety was devoted towards staging a one big coup against her mom. That's not a recipe for a life of leisure.

"Well," Akio said and sat back in his chair. "You should get out and have some fun. Celebrate your victory. Actually enjoy yourself for a night now that you can."

He didn't know if that line of advice would work for someone like Satsuki, but she was just a person after all. Even the strongest of people need a way to unwind.

"You act like I've never had a pleasant evening before," She frowned slightly at the implication.

"Drinking tea all alone in the dead of night doesn't count."

Satsuki let out a small sigh, but didn't object to it, much to his surprise. Was she really not going to counter that?

"Fun, huh?" She mused. She *wanted* to object to Akio's statement, but she didn't know if she could truthfully.

"Yeah," Akio nodded, a small smile growing on his lips. This might just work out perfectly. "In fact, you can start by joining me for dinner tonight. I'm going to be taking Akiko and some others out to celebrate her first days of school. You should definitely come with."

"Really?" Satsuki turned to him skeptically. "I wouldn't want to intrude on-"

"Oh, please," Akio waved her off. "I spent a month with you in a dingy, rotten cell. At this point, you're basically family."

Her eyes widened at that, but she quickly reeled herself in.

"Then I would be honored to join you all," Satsuki smiled.

Akio returned the smile, feeling his shoulders lighten a little.

The two continued to sit in each other's presence, but now it felt much more comfortable. It was something new for both of them, but unlike the other changes in their lives, this one was much more acceptable.

There was still something that Satsuki wanted to bring up with Akio, but it could wait for now. She didn't want to spoil the moment with something unsavory.

And that's that! This one's a little shorter than I would like, but I felt it was for the best.

Yeah, this one was a bit Satsuki centered. I wanted to expand on the OVA a bit, especially on how the characters felt after the end of the events of KLK. I mean, you can get a general idea of it in the show, but I wanted to show it a bit more.

Well, thanks for reading everyone! I hope the next chapter won't take NEARLY as long, as I've got a better idea on how I want to proceed with the story.

Thank you all for your constant support, and I'll see you next time!

Paralogue - Don't Forget the Fries!

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next installment of First Comes Love!

Now, if you read my first story (which you probably did), or played the Fire Emblem series, you've all encountered a few paralogues. Think of it as a little side chapter, independent of the story. Or deleted scenes!

This little chapter here's a bit different than one I've written before. Most of my other work is somewhat linear, but this one is a bit all over the place. It cuts around a lot, with multiple different scenes with different characters. It reads more like an episode of an anime than a chapter of a story, really. For a chapter of this nature, I thought that was better than to just follow one singular character the entire time. Hopefully you all enjoy it!

Akio yawned, absentmindedly scrubbing the dish in his hand with a soapy sponge. Having returned from his meeting with Satsuki, he noticed that the place was looking a little dirty. Dirty dishes in the sink, dusty shelves, clutter here and there, it was definitely due for a bit of a cleaning.

Of course, he could have finished the book he had started reading weeks ago, but he just didn't really feel like it. Besides, the place had to be cleaned eventually, right? It's just common sense to do it now instead of later.

Akiko sat at the table in the dining room next to the kitchen, humming quietly to herself as she doodled in a coloring book. Not coloring, though. Akio had found it curious when he had first noticed, but Akiko had claimed that the 'pictures were boring,' so, she took it upon herself to spice them up a little bit. Adding a mustache here

and there, maybe a silly hat or some pretty flowers in the background. Akio thought it was insanely cute.

The two were having a nice and quiet evening, but Akio still felt anxious. It felt like he was forgetting something...

"Hey, brother?" Akiko chirped, not bothering to look up from her doodles.

"Yes?"

"When's dinner, again?"

"At eight," Akio replied, stopping his scrubbing when a thought struck him.

I did say eight, right?

Putting down the dish and drying off his hands, he reached for his phone on the counter and flipped it open.

He must have said eight. He definitely recalled saying eight earlier.

Ryuko:

Sounds good, see you at seven.

"Shit."

"Hey!" Akiko perked her head up and pointed an accusatory finger at Akio. "That's a yen in the swear jar!"

Akio twisted his head to look at the clock behind him.

It was six-thirty. The burger joint was across town. The bus they were supposed to catch left ten minutes ago.

"You'll have to remind me when we get back, princess," Akio mumbled, hurriedly pacing across the room to grab his wallet and

keys. "Change of plans, dinner is actually in thirty minutes."

Akiko blinked in surprise until realization dawned on her.

"You messed up the times, didn't you."

"Maybe?" Akio chuckled and rubbed the back of his head. "I'm sorry, Akiko, I guess it just slipped my mind."

"It's okay," Akiko smiled and hopped down from her chair. "I'm ready to go anyways."

"Thanks sweetie," Akio returned it and gave himself a pat down. Keys? Check. Wallet? Check. Phone? Check. He was good to go.

Oh man, hopefully everyone won't be too pissed at me. Maybe if I run we could make it there in time...

Akio knelt in front of Akiko, facing his back to her.

"We're gonna have to go pretty quickly, so why don't you hop on my back?"

"Really?" Her face brightened.

"You bet. Now hop on."

Akiko giggled and jumped onto his back, while Akio held onto her legs to keep her in place.

"And we're off!"

Ryuko stopped outside the burger joint that Akio had decided on.

The pickings were slim in a Japanese city such as Honnou City, but there were still a few choices they could go to for a decent burger. There was a McDonalds, a Burger Queen, a Mendy's, an Out-N-In, and even a Five Girls. Ryuko loved Five Girls, so she was somewhat

happy that Akio and Akiko decided on that one. They had hella good burgers and fries.

Letting out a soft sigh, she pulled out her phone from her jacket pocket.

Six-thirty. She was here a solid thirty minutes before the decided time.

"Damn, really?" She cursed under her breath and shoved her phone back into its pocket. She was definitely anxious to make sure she got here in time, but she didn't know she was *this* anxious about it. Thirty minutes early? Seriously? She had never been thirty minutes early in her life.

It could be worse, I guess.

Ryuko *really* did want to get there early. Never in her life had she *had* to have been somewhere. She always lived the life of a lone wolf, doing what she wanted when she wanted. But now, with this big, strange family she had found, she actually had obligations. It was nice.

"Well, it looks like I've got some time to kill..." She mumbled to herself and pushed open the glass doors to the restaurant.

She had been to a lot of these places over the years. When you essentially live on the road, the only reliable food you could really find was fast food or crappy gas station food, and she hated gas station food.

The interior was the same carbon copy of every other fast food interior: booths, a few tables, and the cashiers and kitchen placed in the front of the place. Sadly, this particular chain didn't have any of those dinky playgrounds, either. So it was even more boring.

No one came here for interior decorating.

She glanced around the establishment, hoping to find a table large enough to seat everyone that was coming. Last time she checked, Akio had invited Satsuki and her gang, the Mankanshokus, and his brother, Aikuro Mikisugi. That was a total of *fifteen* chairs if the Mankanshokus brought along Guts, and she knew they would. That was a hell of a lot of people. There was no way a little place like this in a Japanese city would have a table that large.

Ryuko's eyes widened when they fell upon the back corner of the room, where a familiar face had already acquired a large portion of the seating.

"Ah, hello Ryuko," Satsuki smiled slightly and took a reserved sip of tea from her styrofoam cup.

Gamagoori gulped, his feet coming to a stop in front of the familiar door of the Mankanshoku residence.

His purpose here should be obvious. Takahiro's little get together was in twenty minutes, and he was going to ask Mako if she would do him the honor of accompanying him there. That was it. Nothing too serious. Just a little question.

The disciplinary president wiped the sweat from his brow.

This should be simple! All he was doing was asking a friend to ride with him to dinner! That's mundane- boring, even! He was Ira Gamagoori, this should be child's play. He had fought much tougher battles than this and come out on the other side.

And yet, he could think those things all he wanted, he still felt butterflies in his stomach. This battle was one he was unfamiliar in.

"Knock on the door already!" Sanageyama whispered at him from his hiding spot behind the nearby wall.

Gamagoori closed his eyes, having to bite his cheek to sate his anger.

Come to think of it, having his fellow Elite Four member 'cheer' him on from the sidelines made it a whole lot worse. Why did he actually let him tag along?

"If you don't, I'll do it-"

Sanageyama immediately shut his mouth and jumped back when the door opened on its own.

"Hmm?" Mrs. Mankanshoku blinked at the giant of a man, recognition slowly dawning on her. "Oh, you're Mr. Gamagoori! One of the kids' friends!"

Gamagoori's eye twitched. 'Friends?' That might be true now, but he was also their superior. Still was!

"Y-yes," He stammered, nodding a few times for good measure. "Yes I am."

"Well, neither Ryuko or Akio are here right now," Mrs. Mankanshoku smiled at him. "Unless... you're looking for Mako?"

Her smile grew a bit more mischievous after that.

"Say yes!" Sanageyama hissed at him.

"Uh, indeed I am, ma'am," Gamagoori replied. "Is-is she here, by any chance?"

"Why don't I go and get her," She winked and ducked behind the door. "Mako! You have a visitor!"

Gamagoori felt heat rise to his cheeks, which the thought of only made his blush that much worse. Gamagoori? Blushing? Unheard of. Just what the hell was happening to him? First stuttering, now blushing?!

Pull it together, Ira! You are one of the Elite Four, not some flustered school girl!

"Oh, really?!" Mako yelled back from somewhere in the house, followed by the sound of several things crashing to the ground. "Coming!"

Within seconds the brunette appeared at the door, her shoulders rising and falling rapidly as she gasped for air.

Did she really run all the way to the door?" The giant thought to himself.

"G-Gamagoori!" Mako gasped, her entire face lighting up. "What're you doing here?"

"Well," Gamagoori coughed into his fist, his eyes suddenly avoiding the heavily breathing girl. "Since we're both attending Takahiro's dinner, I was wondering if you wanted to accompany me there."

"All the way there? Across town? That's a long walk!"

"No, we would drive there."

"You can drive?" Mako tilted her head to the side.

"Yes," Gamagoori furrowed his brow. "I drove you, Matoi and Takahiro home before. Do you not remember?"

"Hmm, I guess not," Mako placed her index finger to her chin and shrugged. "But now that-"

"Nonsense, young man!"

A new voice interrupted the two, this one somewhat unfamiliar to Gamagoori.

Nonsense?! Who dares-

A middle-aged man appeared at the door behind Mako, wearing a white t-shirt that could barely cover his stomach, and a pair of patchy jeans. Now he remembered him.

"Ah, good afternoon, Mr. Mankanshoku," Gamagoori dipped his head in respect. Even if he was a... character, he was still the man of the house. It was Gamagoori's duty to show him the proper respect.

"Don't you worry about driving Mako anywhere," Mr. Mankanshoku crossed his arms and smiled. "You can ride with us!"

"Ride with you?"

The only vehicle the Mankanshokus had was that rickety old truck. He doubted he could even fit in the front, let alone the truck bed.

"I wouldn't dare impose on you all like that," Gamagoori shook his head.

"Worry not! As Honnou City's back-alley doctor, it's my job to save people on gas. For a minimal fee, of course."

"Is that really in your job description?" Gamagoori muttered. "It sounds more like a taxi service."

"Call it what you will," The older man shrugged. "But since you're a family friend, we'll give you a ride on the house."

Gamagoori glanced over at Mako, who nodded at him enthusiastically.

"Thank you, sir," Gamagoori lowered his head in resignation.

Off in the distance he could hear Sanageyama let out an exasperated sigh.

Gamagoori ran a hand through his hair, trying to keep his frustration in check. He had originally come here to pick up Mako, but now he

was hitching a ride with the entire Mankanshoku clan. How the hell did it end up like this?!

"Of course, our truck *is* pretty small," Mr. Mankanshoku hummed and rubbed his chin. "We might have to buddy up. Mako, would you mind riding in your friend's lap?"

"Oh, no that's quite-" Gamagoori began only to get cut off.

"Sure thing, Pops!" Mako saluted.

Gamagoori paled. Oh, dear.

At this point, Akio was breathing heavily. He had been running for at least twenty minutes now, with little Akiko latched to his back like a backpack. It had been twenty minutes, so that meant he only had ten minutes left till seven, and he still had at least another twenty minutes of running left.

"Mush! Mush!" Akiko shouted, using his hair as makeshift reins.

"I'm going to... make you... walk... if you... keep that up," Akio gasped between breaths.

Man, I'm really getting out of shape.

Of course, the added weight did not help.

"Make a horse noise! Make a horse noise!"

"I... will... do... no... such thing."

If he neighed like a horse, that'd be the last bit of dignity he had left right down the drain.

But it was his little sister...

"Maybe later."

"Yay!" Akiko laughed and clapped her hands together.

"H-hey, don't let go!"

Akiko squeaked and grabbed back on before she teetered too far backwards.

If only he had the breath to sigh.

"Are we almost there?"

"Almost," Akio exhaled and winced slightly. His legs were seriously beginning to burn, but he tried to ignore it.

"You said that ten minutes ago," Akiko whined and bopped him softly him on the head.

"And we're... ten minutes... closer."

Akiko groaned.

"We'll get there... soon... promise."

"If you say so," Akiko sighed, but her breath caught in her throat. "H-hey, Akio?"

"Yes?"

"Is that car following us?"

Akio skidded to a halt and turned on his heels.

They were being followed?!

Sure enough, a black BMW was tailing them a few hundred feet away, going no faster than five miles per hour. By the looks of it, it was a very expensive car. He didn't know much about cars, but it was definitely a fairly recent model, and he knew that the brand of car wasn't particularly cheap.

Damn, how did I not notice this?!

A car moving that slow wasn't exactly hard to spot, especially when it was following you. He was just too caught up in the moment to be fully aware of his surroundings.

Was he really slipping this much?

Akio's anger at himself would have to wait. The car was nearly on them now.

Kneeling down, Akio let Akiko off of his back.

"Just stay behind me, all right?" He spoke in a hushed whisper.

He felt Akiko's head nod against his leg.

The car's tires screeched as it came to a stop in front of them. This was it. Akio cursed at himself for not bringing a weapon of some sorts with him. Even a small knife would have worked. Just something to scare-

The car window rolled down, revealing the pink head of Nonon Jakuzure.

"Yo."

"Nonon?!" Akio gasped, his heart nearly plummeting into his stomach at the sudden reveal. He actually thought it was something life-threatening for a moment!

"Miss Nonon!" Akiko cried with glee and trotted up to the car.

"Hey squirt," Nonon smiled at the younger girl then turned to Akio with a frown. "Need a ride? You know, to the dinner you're hosting?"

There was that Nonon charm.

"Yes please."

"Hop in."

Akio sighed in relief and did as he was told, but not before buckling in Akiko in the backseat.

Nonon was rather difficult to get along with, but Akio wasn't one to look a gift horse in the mouth. A free ride was a free ride, and he was damn tired of running.

"Thanks a ton, Nonon," Akio said as he moved to the shotgun seat.

"Don't mention it."

The first thing he was greeted with when he sat down was the smell. The inside of the BMW reeked of strawberries and perfume. It was very Nonon. The rest of the interior wasn't, however. The seats were a nice gray leather, and the dashboard was a solid black with some glowy lights.

And then there was the faint sound of upbeat j-pop coming from the speaker system.

"You a fan of this stuff?" Akio glanced over at the driver and smirked.

"I-I was just flipping through the channels," Nonon blushed slightly and slapped at the radio, turning it off. "Besides, what does it matter what I listen to in my own car?"

"It doesn't," Akio shrugged and turned to the window to hide his growing smile. He owed Nonon a great deal for all of her help, but god damn if it wasn't satisfying to tease her.

It was fun to see her squirm on occasion, but quite honestly Akio had grown quite fond of the pink haired girl. Partly because she had saved Akiko and Mataro's life, but also because she was just kind of fun to be around. Her snarky personality was entertaining.

"It's okay, Miss Nonon, I really like that song too."

If Nonon wasn't driving she might have buried her head in her hands.

"Good to know I have the same taste as a five-year-old," Nonon grumbled under her breath and shot a glare at Akio. "I should have left you running along the side of the road like an idiot."

"Just how long were you following us for?" Akio rose an eyebrow at her.

"Following? Don't use such creeper words," Nonon deflected with a huff. "I just happened to be driving by and saw you two at the side of the road. It was out of the *goodness* in my heart that I offered you a ride, you know."

"Awh, we love you too, Nonon."

"You're one wrong word away from getting your butt kicked to the curb," Nonon growled, her pale cheeks tinted slightly red.

Akio threw his head back and laughed, which only upset Nonon further.

"You better shut your mouth for the rest of the car ride."

"What about me?" Akiko asked from the back seat.

"You're fine."

"In fact," Akio cut in. "Why don't you tell Nonon about your first days of school?"

Nonon shot Akio another glare, but this one didn't look as threatening.

"Oh, can I?!" The little girl smiled broadly, already attached to the idea.

"As long as she doesn't mind, that is."

"... I don't mind," Nonon mumbled reluctantly, but Akio could see the subtle traces of a smile.

If he knew his running late would have ended up like this, he wouldn't have felt as guilty about it at the time.

Ryuko sipped from her coke, her eyes everywhere but on the girl in front of her. This must have been the twentieth time she examined Five Girls' menu.

Satsuki didn't look uncomfortable at the situation. Not in the slightest, in fact. She just kind of smiled at her sister, taking the occasional sip of her damned tea. It was like it was just another normal, everyday occurrence to her!

Could she really be so easily satisfied?! They had been sitting like this for at least ten minutes after the usual "hey how's it going" chat. Ryuko just didn't know how to proceed from here. Conversations weren't really her forte. The people she talked to most were Akio and Mako, and they were as similar as black and white. Not very good sources to reference for tips.

"So," Satsuki began, setting down her drink. "You're here early. No offense, but I didn't take you for the punctual type."

Oh, thank God she finally said something.

"I'm not really," Ryuko shrugged. "But I'd like to change that."

"Oh?" Satsuki rose an eyebrow. "And why's that?"

"Just going straight for it, huh?"

"I'm sorry. You don't have to answer if you don't want to."

"Nah, don't worry about it," Ryuko waved her off and looked down to her lap. That was a pretty tough question. "I don't know... it's just..."

Ryuko paused and glanced up at her sister. She looked genuinely intrigued with where Ryuko was going to go with this.

It was comforting.

"I just don't want to become that person again, you know?"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, please," Ryuko gave Satsuki a very pointed look. "You and I both know what my past was like."

They were both fully aware of Ryuko's delinquent past. Half the town probably was by now.

"True," Satsuki nodded and smirked slightly. "The 'Guitar Case Drifter,' was it?"

"Oh, God," Ryuko groaned and buried her face in her hands.

It was strange, really. A year ago, she was more than happy to adorn that title. Proud, even. It was a testament to what she had been able to accomplish in her time alone.

And that was her main problem with it. She didn't want people to think of the 'Guitar Case Drifter' or the 'Kanto Vagabond' when they thought of Ryuko Matoi. She wanted to be more than that.

She owed it to Senketsu.

Hopefully Satsuki didn't notice Ryuko wince at the thought of her former friend.

"What about you?" Ryuko spoke up, hoping to get the limelight off of her. "Why are you here so early?"

Considering who she was asking, it was probably a stupid question, but still.

"I was personally invited to a dinner," Satsuki answered plainly. "It'd be rude of me as a guest to not show up early."

"It looks like you got all of the prim and proper genes, huh?" Ryuko smirked.

"Yes," Satsuki smiled. "And you all of the brash stubbornness."

"I don't know, I think we both have that one in common."

They both smiled at that, and Ryuko was already beginning to feel more comfortable in her presence. Satsuki wasn't an alien, after all. She was a human being, just like Ryuko was... Well, it was more like the other way around, but the point still stands.

A part of her wanted to ask Satsuki about her parents since they were in on the topic, but she knew this was neither the place nor the time. There's only so much you can discuss in the confines of a fast food joint.

"So, any thoughts on graduation?" Ryuko asked, changing the subject. "It is coming up, right?"

"It is," Satsuki nodded. "And to be honest, I haven't given it much thought. I suppose I should."

"You suppose?" Ryuko scoffed and shook her head. "It's your last year of high school. You should be living it up."

Satsuki snorted slightly, causing Ryuko to tilt her head to the side curiously.

"What?"

"Your boyfriend had very similar advice, albeit different wording."

"Well duh. It's pretty good-," Ryuko stopped, a sudden thought striking her. "Wait, you knew we were dating?"

Satsuki blinked, her eyes widening.

"Was I not supposed to? It seems like pretty common knowledge nowadays."

Ryuko made a thoughtful noise and leaned against the back of her chair, letting her arms drape over the back of it and turning her head up to the ceiling.

"Yeah, we weren't very secretive about it in the end," She said. "I don't know, I guess I was just surprised because me and you never really talked about that kind of stuff before."

"You mean relationships?" Satsuki rose an eyebrow. "Would you... like to talk about things like that?"

"I, uh," Ryuko blushed slightly and glanced at her sister. "Do you?"

Satsuki pursed her lips, her eyes quickly clouded in thought.

Uh-oh. Should she have declined? Or maybe she would have been better off saying nothing at all. She should have known better. It was way too soon in their new sister relationship to start getting so buddy-buddy-

The prim and proper Satsuki broke out into a fit of laughter, causing Ryuko to nearly fall out of her seat.

She... she was laughing?

Ryuko stared dumbfounded at her sister. She never thought Satsuki could laugh like this. It wasn't a cold laugh, devoid of any merriment. Nor was it a maniacal laugh, like something an evil genius might do. It was like bells chiming. It was the laugh of a happy eighteen year old girl.

Soon enough, Ryuko found herself smiling.

"What's so funny?" She asked, genuinely curious.

"Oh, well," Satsuki paused and wiped a tear from her eye. "It's nothing, really."

Satsuki elected not to mention how friendly their conversations had become as of late. Sometimes it was better to not point out the obvious; not everything needed a label.

It sure as hell made Ryuko more curious, though.

"You girls having fun?"

The two sisters both turned their heads towards the door, where Akio, Akiko, and the rest of the gang were piling in.

"Oh, you know," Ryuko grinned and shot a glance at her sister. "We were just chatting."

"Indeed."

"Sounds like fun," Akio grinned and gave Satsuki a nod before kissing the top of Ryuko's head. "You two ready for some greasy burgers and salty fries?"

The two nodded, and the rest of the crew began to take their seats at the table, with Akiko front and center.

"Yo!" Akio whistled at the lone boy behind the counter. "Thirty burgers, thirty orders of fries, and fifteen drinks over here."

The cashier gave Akio a cold, hard stare like he had just insulted his very existence, but he only nodded and placed the order.

"Make it thirty-five burgers!" Mataro called out.

"Thirty-seven, if you don't mind!" His father tagged on.

"Hell, why not an even forty?" Aikuro chuckled. "I'm feeling pretty hungry."

"F-f-forty burgers, sir?" The cashier asked, giving Akio a very sad look. "Forty?"

"You heard them," Akio shrugged and sat down beside Ryuko, leaving the cashier to his own devices.

The cashier hung his head and trudged towards the kitchen, knowing that he'd have to help out with an order of this magnitude on a day as slow as this.

"Damn group orders," He grumbled under his breath, cursing himself for even bothering to show up today.

And there you have it!

So yeah, nothing really story intensive happens this chapter, but we do get some some dialogue. Lots and lots of dialogue. My favorite!

Hope you all enjoyed, and I'll see you all next time!

Kintsugi, Part I

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next chapter of First Comes Love!

Originally, I was just going to go straight into the big OVA fight after the last chapter, but I decided to throw one more little two parter in there for good measure. I felt like we were seriously lacking some Ryuko and Akio moments, so I decided to write this to make up for it!

I was also going to make this just one big chapter, but in the end I chose to split it in two. It felt weird having the mood change so suddenly (as it will later on), so this little tidbit will be a bit more on the fluffy side!

Also, unrelated, but if you know the meaning of this chapter's name is, kudos to you!

I hope you all enjoy!

Akio pulled back the curtains and looked outside, his jaw tightening at the sight that awaited him.

It was a thunderstorm.

The sky had turned into this ominous tar-black as the rain poured down, with no signs of stopping any time soon. The droplets of water pelted angrily against the window, creating a loud tapping sound that was grating on his nerves. It reminded him of the buzzing of hundreds of angry bees. The sound only stopped when it was interrupted by the booming of thunder overhead, which only made it worse.

Akio took a step back and let the curtains close. He *hated* thunderstorms. Ever since he was little, the violent nature of the

storms scared him. Rain he was fine with. It could be calming even, especially when it was light. But the thunder and harsh winds that accompanied them... that was a different story.

If the sirens started going off, he really might just lose it.

"Sorry, Satsuki," Akio said and fell back onto the bed behind him. He was supposed to have a meeting with the student council president later in the day, and from the way she sounded over the phone, it seemed important. Whatever it was, he had no clue, but he did know it'd have to wait. There was no way in hell he was going out in that. He'd just text her later saying he couldn't make it. Hopefully she'd understand.

Taking a few deep breaths, he tried to calm himself, but it was no use. Every time there was a flash of light and a loud boom overhead he always flinch. Even though he knew they were coming, he flinched every time! They were like miniature explosions. How could you not be afraid of explosions?

There were only two things in the world that would calm him right now and neither were here with him. The other night Akiko wanted to stay the night over at the Mankanshoku, which Akio found no reason to object to at the time, so he had given the okay. If he had known about this storm, he would have said no almost immediately. There wouldn't have been any room for discussion.

Thinking about his little sister made him fret even more.

Grabbing his phone, he dialed the Mankanshoku's home phone number in a vain attempt to get a hold of someone.

Immediate disconnect.

No connection.

Looks like he wouldn't get to talk to Akiko *or* Ryuko.

Akio squeezed his eyes shut. He truly was alone.

Boooooom!

The sudden thunder nearly made Akio's heart burst from his chest.

"God damn son-of-a..."

He jumped up and paced out of the room, all the while muttering curses under his breath. He had to do something, otherwise he'd just lay there listening to the sounds of the storm for the next few hours. That really wouldn't do him any good.

Entering the kitchen, he opened up the cabinets above the kitchen sink and pulled out a box of pre-bagged tea. Hopefully the tea would take his mind off of things and alleviate some of the stress caused by the storm. Food was definitely out of the question at a time like this, so tea was his last resort.

Another boom of thunder caused Akio to drop the box to the floor, sending all of the bags flying every which way on the tile.

"Damn it!" Akio cursed, his closed fist nearly connecting with the countertop before he stopped himself.

God, what is with me...

Akio let out a shaky sigh and ran a hand over his face. He's felt rather irritable lately, and it wasn't just because of the thunderstorm. It's felt like he's barely gotten any sleep the past week, but that was nothing new. Akio had never been much of a dreamer, but as of late he's been having these recurring nightmares that'd scare the crap out of him. It'll be fine for the first few hours of sleep, but then it starts to show itself. They were things that he'd rather not see or feel ever again.

Needless to say, after experiencing that he'd rather just live with a few hours of sleep.

Preparing some water to heat, he reached down and picked up the packs.

It was just a rough patch. Things would go back to normal in a couple of weeks. It's natural to have nightmares. Everyone has them!

That's what he told himself and he'd stick to it.

While he waited for the water to get warm he walked over to the TV and turned it on. Maybe the TV would take his mind off of things.

"... it is currently advised to stay indoors and avoid going outside if possible, as the conditions are dangerous. The typhoon should last for at least two more days, so make sure to take the necessary precautions. Make sure you have enough food and water in case- "

"Great," Akio grumbled and turned off the television. Just what he needed to hear. A damn typhoon.

Now he was even more worried about Akiko. If this lasted another two days, she'd be stuck over there without any way for Akio to contact her. Hopefully the connection wouldn't be so shitty in a few hours. If he could just get in contact with her...

"What am I going to do with myself?" Akio moaned to the empty room. He never realized how much he treasured Akiko's presence around the house until just now. Even on her off days, she was always a little bundle of joy to him. It was like she literally brightened whatever room she were in. If she were here right now, they could play a game or watch a movie or something, and then Akio wouldn't have to worry over this damn storm.

Bang, bang, bang!

"AHH!" Akio yelled and fell the ground with a hand over his chest.

It wasn't thunder this time, but the door? Who the hell would be knocking at a time like this!?

"W-who is it?" Akio called out shakily and stood.

"It's me!" A familiar voice called back.

That sounded an awful lot like...

"It couldn't be."

There's just no way...

Akio jogged over to the door and pulled it open to reveal the form of his dripping wet girlfriend.

"R-Ryuko?" Akio's jaw dropped at the sight of her.

"Hey, there. Mind if I come in? I'm soaked."

Without waiting for a reply, she strode past Akio, giving him a peck on the chin as she went by.

"O-of course!" Akio stammered, still staring at Ryuko dumbfounded. "But what in the hell are you doing here?"

"I was in the area, so I thought I'd drop by!" Ryuko shouted back her reply from somewhere deeper in the apartment. "Everyone else is taking shelter with Satsuki in some giant mansion, so I thought you might want some company since you're here all alone."

Well, she was right about that. He really was starting to go stir crazy here all alone. It was also a huge weight off of his shoulders that Akiko and the others were safe and sound.

"But a mansion?" Akio called back. "Did it really need to be a mansion? That seems so... unnecessary."

"You're telling me! Apparently the basement is the size of one of these apartments alone!"

That's just insanely impractical. Just what would one do with a basement that large? At least Akiko would have fun with them, but the point still stands.

"But what are you doing here in this weather?" He asked skeptically and walked to the kitchen just as Ryuko returned with a towel in hand. "It's raining cats and dogs out there. You could have gotten hurt, you know."

Ryuko rolled her eyes as she begun drying her hair.

"You'd think I'd get a warmer welcome after coming all the way here to make sure you were okay," She offhandedly remarked. "Some boyfriend you are."

Akio sighed and shook his head, but he felt a smile form on his face regardless. How silly. Of course he was.

"Of course I'm happy to see you."

"Well that's more- hey!"

Before she could finish, Akio had closed the distance between the two in an instant and wrapped his arms around her in a vice grip.

"Very, very happy."

"Y-you're going to get wet too you idiot!" Ryuko blushed, leaving her arms hanging over his shoulders in a vain attempt to keep her partner dry. "Don't you have any common sense at all?"

"It's fine."

"You could have just waited until I changed!"

"It's. Fine."

Ryuko huffed as if she might protest further, but instead wrapped her arms around his back and rested her chin on his shoulder.

"If you say so. Just don't start yapping at me when we both need to change clothes."

Smiling, she tightened her grip around him and sunk into it. After the experience she had running here, his warmth was most welcoming. It really was raining cats and dogs out there.

Boom!

Ryuko felt Akio flinch in her grasp at the sounds of the storm.

"Thank you for coming all the way here," He spoke quietly after a brief moment of silence.

Ryuko remained quiet for a bit before replying.

"... There's no where I'd rather be."

Akio's grip tightened even more. If he squeezed any harder, he might have broken a rib. Ryuko couldn't tell if it was because of what she said or because of the thunder.

"You don't like storms, do you?"

"Hate 'em."

"Since when?"

"Since always," Akio mumbled into her hair. "I don't like any of it. The lightning, the thunder, the wind, nothing."

"Not even the rain?"

"The rain's all right," He admitted weakly. "Everything else can go away though."

"Man, I didn't know you were such a wimp."

Akio could almost feel the smug aura radiating from her. He couldn't let her off that easy after that one.

"Says the girl that's afraid of needles."

"T-that's different!" Ryuko protested hotly and bopped him in the shoulder. "You are literally getting stabbed every time you get a shot, you know that right? Are you telling me you like getting stabbed?"

"How is that any worse than a tornado sweeping through and leveling a town? I'd rather get poked with a needle than swept away like a plastic bag."

The two remained quiet for a few moments, both taking each other's arguments to heart.

"Call it even?" Akio offered.

"I can live with that," Ryuko nodded. "You were starting to crush me, anyways."

"O-oh!" Akio recoiled backwards. "I-I'm sorry, Ryuko, I should have-"

"Oh, hush. I was just joking."

Akio sighed in relief. He was happy he didn't go *too* overboard with his hug. He just... he really fucking hated storms. Plus, when she had given him that line, he just couldn't control himself. Ryuko had always been this fierce and hotheaded woman to him, so it was always a surprise to see her cuter girly side.

Ryuko was watching him curiously at the sudden change in his mood. Akio noted the lines of worry in her brow.

It looked like she was... pitying him. Why would she pity him all of a sudden?

"We should get you out of those clothes before you catch a cold."

He cursed at himself for changing the subject like that, but he just didn't want her to continue looking at him like that. He didn't want it to be that obvious. Akio wanted to have fun with her while she was here and not look like a complete wreck. He shouldn't be that weak.

Ryuko blinked, her train of thought broken.

"Yeah, I guess so," She agreed meekly. "I didn't bring a change of clothes, though."

"Don't worry about that," Akio waved her off and lead her by the hand to his room. "You can just borrow some of my clothes."

"Your clothes?" Ryuko hesitated. "But..."

"But?" Akio stopped and turned to her. "I didn't think this was much of a 'but' situation."

"It's just... you taste in clothing is so bad. You do know there's more colors than black and white, right? It's like you've never seen a rainbow before."

"Well, *excuse* me. I didn't know you were always such a little fashionista."

"I guess I can live with looking like some gothic chick," Ryuko gave an exaggerated sigh and walked into his room.

"You do know I have more colors than just white and black, right?" Akio asked as he followed after her.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Ryuko said and opened up his closet, only to poke her head out to give him a pointed look. "And grey doesn't count."

Akio rolled his eyes and tried to look as miffed as possible, but he couldn't help but smile as well.

"Wow, I didn't think you owned any button-ups," Ryuko hummed and pulled out a blue one. "Even blue. Impressive. Maybe your sense of fashion isn't completely lost after all."

"I aim to please," Akio deadpanned and placed himself behind Ryuko so that they could both peruse his clothing. "I think you'd look good in blue. It matches your eyes."

"And you called me the fashionista," Ryuko griped, but Akio's compliment had left her feeling pleased. "Blue it is."

"There are some gym shorts in the bottom shelf over there."

Ryuko nodded and waked over to his dresser, leaving Akio to pick out his own change of clothes out.

"I guess I could afford to spruce up my wardrobe," Akio mumbled to himself and pulled out a white shirt. There were a bunch of black and white, a few blues, and a single green one. They were pretty bland looking too. His only green shirt had no designs on it. Just plain green. Talk about boring.

Well, he was never one for flashy attire. There's nothing wrong with boring outfits! They were just practical.

Taking off his now damp shirt, he tossed it behind him where it fell to the floor harmlessly. He paused before putting on his new shirt, his eyes once again drawn to his tattered midsection. Akio knew he did it every time he changed, but he just couldn't help it. His eyes were drawn to them like magnets every time he inspected himself.

He had grown to accept them over time, but that didn't mean he liked them. Each one carried a memory more painful than the injuries themselves. There were the ones he had gotten from Iori back in the very beginning, which seemed like nothing now. The ones he had received from the hands of Nui and Ragyo had left the most long-lasting damage.

"I really did take a beating, huh..." He whispered to himself, his fingers absentmindedly rubbing across the worst scar on his abdomen; the one he had gotten from Ryuko herself. He never knew how to feel about this one. It had always left him with a storm cloud of emotions.

Akio sneakily glanced at his now half-naked girlfriend on the other side of the room. Ryuko had changed out of her wet clothing and was now only wearing her undergarments. He felt guilty peeping on her like this, but she was just so mesmerizing to him. The fact that not a single scar marred her skin was so utterly flabbergasting to a ragged man like himself. Ryuko had taken at least ten times the beating he had over the years, but her pale skin still didn't show a single sign of it. Akio had personally witnessed Ryuko's heart get ripped from her chest, as well as watched as she was cut in two, but there was not a single mark of evidence that those things ever happened. He knew why that was the case now, but thinking about it was just a whole other can of worms he didn't want to get into. Life Fiber-human hybrid or not, she was still the woman he loved. That was enough for him.

Now that he thought about it, this was the first time that Akio had ever inspected Ryuko so closely before. Sure, he had seen her half-naked literally dozens of times now, but this is the first time he's felt his eyes linger like this. Her skin was so smooth and strikingly pale, which really brought out the black of her hair and the blue of her eyes. Her curves were in all the right places as well, and then there were her more... feminine aspects, which were nothing to scoff at either. Had he really never noticed this side of her before? Or was it that he just avoided it?

Akio blushed furiously and looked away before she could notice. He was vastly aware that his feelings of awe had turned into ones of longing. That came as a bit of a surprise to him. He didn't think he could get into *that* mood so easily.

Slapping his cheek a few times, he hurriedly changed his clothes. That was a close one. He was getting a little too *observant* there and

let his mind wander to rather dangerous places. Thank god he didn't get a-

"Hey, you hungry?"

Akio nearly jumped out of his skin, somehow forgetting that Ryuko was actually still in the room with him.

"H-hungry? Me? Y-yeah, I guess I could eat," Akio laughed nervously. He probably sounded like a mad man.

You should probably face her now you idiot.

Akio gulped and turned around, hoping to keep his emotions in check but failing miserably.

Ryuko had changed into the blue button up, which was about two sizes too big for her. It went down to the middle of her thighs, completely covering up whatever pair of shorts she might have been wearing, but still leaving a fair bit of leg showing. It left very little to the imagination, that's for sure.

Heat rushed back into Akio's cheeks. He knew a lot of guys had fantasies very similar to this one, but he never thought he would get to experience it firsthand.

"What's wrong?" Ryuko cocked her head to the side, completely unaware to the sudden effect she was having on him.

"I, uh, just remembered I have to take a shower!" Akio exclaimed and briskly paced out of the room. "A very, very cold shower."

Ryuko watched him sprint out of the room, raising an eyebrow curiously.

"What's up with him all of a sudden?"

And that's that!

I know, I know, it's a little on the short side. But a little something is better than nothing, right! Plus this way I can get an update out to you all quicker.

Next chapter we'll get to the second part of this impromptu two parter! Expect some serious developments next chapter.

Until next time!

Kintsugi, Part II

Hey everyone! Welcome to the next installment of First Comes Love!

As I promised in the last update, here it is! Funnily enough, this actually only took me 3 days to write, compared to god knows how long for previous drafts of this chapter. I guess that's what happens when the ideas start flowing.

Expect lots of fluff and feel good moments this chapter. I'm finally getting around to finish up this character arc of Akio Takahiro's. For the longest time, I had no clue where I wanted to go with this bit of depression he had found himself in. Last year I planned on getting super melodramatic with it, or even worse, some edgy revenge plot.

But, screw that. That sucked.

What I have now is something I actually feel good about. It ties up the loose ends on what Akio has become in this story, and it's transitioned into something that isn't all "hurdur I'm all angsty now because my author wrote my parents off for no good reason."

So, yeah. I feel good about this.

And before anyone leaves a review about Ryuko this chapter, yes I know this would be majorly out of character for her, but remember: the Ryuko I have written up to this point is vastly different than the genuine article. That's what OCs should do to a story, right? Shake things up, and make their impact felt on the characters around him- at least, that's what I look for.

Anyhow, I hope you all enjoy this chapter!

Disclaimer: I do not own Kill la Kill. May contain some... suggestive themes (but what part of Kill la Kill doesn't, let's be real).

Akio sighed and leaned his head against the wall, content to just let the hot water from the shower head wash over his aching body.

That was the downside of being a teenage soldier: his entire body ached on days where he didn't get out and move around much. Sadly, that had become the norm for the young man as of late. Without a Kiryuin to fight or an organization to help, he really didn't have much to do. He was essentially a stay at home dad at this point, spending most of his days waiting for Akiko to come home.

As he thought of his little sister, the pangs of regret gnawed at his chest.

I never should have let her leave yesterday. I should have went with her.

Akiko wanted so badly to go see the Mankanshokus and to play with Mataro, but Akio... he just wanted some time alone. Some time to think. It felt like he hadn't had any since before the fight with Ragyo begun. He just wanted to be alone for a single day.

So, what better way to than to ship his little sister off to the Mankanshokus to babysit her?

Idiot.

If he knew a goddamned typhoon was on the horizon, he never would have sent her. Or better yet, he would have went along. At least then they could be together. What kind of self-respecting guardian would send their kid off just for their own selfish reasons? Hell, he jumped at the chance.

"What's the matter with me," Akio let out a mirthless chuckle. "Hitting my midlife crisis at the age of eighteen. When did I become such an old man?"

He shook his head. No. Akiko would be fine, and then she'd come home, and he'd continue to live his normal life. That's what he always wanted, right? A normal teenage life.

Except, it wasn't the way he thought it'd be... Nor was it the way he wanted to earn it.

Gah, what am I doing. Ryuko's out there waiting for me.

Ridding the thoughts from his head, he finished his bathing, focusing his mind on the heat of the water hitting his skin. That way, his mind wouldn't wander down the same path it had been as of late.

After a few more scrubs of soap, he rinsed the shampoo out of his hair and turned off the faucet.

He already missed the warm water the minute he stepped out of the tub. There was a chill on the air that sent shivers down his spine. He had half a mind to hop back in the tub for a few more minutes of warmth, but he didn't want to keep his girlfriend waiting.

"Brrr," he shivered, grabbing a nearby towel and wrapping it around his waist. The towel was warm and clean at least; one of the perks of his new status at Honnouji Academy. He would have balked at the thought a year ago, but he had to admit: a working washer and dryer was pretty nice to have around.

Besides. Things change. Thoughts change.

People change.

Drying himself off, he put on a clean pair of clothes. The warm fabric was a blessing on his now cold skin.

As he pulled his shirt over his head, he paused

There was sound coming from the living room.

Was that...

"Music?" Akio quirked an eyebrow. Sure enough, the soft sounds of jazz could be heard echoing throughout the apartment. He didn't have a stereo, so where was it coming from? "Eh, Ryuko's probably just watching something on T.V."

Rubbing his head with the towel a few times, he tossed it in the nearby laundry basket and made his way towards the door. Ryuko was probably out there waiting for him to finish. It'd be rude of him to keep his guest waiting much longer; especially a guest such as her.

A guest such as her... wearing nothing but his button-up and gym shorts...

Akio smacked his cheeks and shook his head.

Let's not go down that rabbit hole again.

As Akio left the bathroom and made his way down the hallway, the sounds of music grew louder and louder. It was curious, but he paid it no mind. It was probably just the T.V.

"Ryuko?" he called out as he got closer. "I'm all done. Want me to make something to eat? I'm-"

His words died on his lips as he entered the room.

"Am... Am I dreaming?"

The living room was completely dark save for the lights coming from a few candles that were lit around the apartment. The soft hum of jazz came from a small, black speaker on the dinner table, really setting a romantic mood that Akio had entirely not been prepared for.

"What exactly is happening right now?" Akio asked Ryuko, who had been waiting for him with a nervous smile on her face.

Ryuko simply shrugged, sheepishly rubbing the back of her head as she averted her gaze. She looked a little goofy standing there in her the shirt that was way too big on her, but he'd be lying if he said she didn't look cute.

Now he *knew* really must be dreaming. Who was this Ryuko imposter?

"You did this?" Akio asked skeptically, hardly believing what he was seeing.

"Y-yeah," Ryuko nodded. "What do you think?"

"Well, uh," Akio hesitated and looked around. "I'm thinking so many things I hardly know where to begin. Where did you get all this stuff?"

"Satsuki," she answered. "You'd be surprised at all the random crap she has."

"I don't think I would," Akio snorted and sniffed a few times. "Is that vanilla I smell?"

"From the candles."

"Oh. Right..." Akio swallowed and glanced at Ryuko, who still hadn't made any moves. "So, er, what's the occasion?"

"W-well, I read about something like this in a book once."

"A book?" he raised an eyebrow. "You? Read?"

"Okay, fine," she huffed and rolled her eyes. "So, I saw it on an anime. There. Are you happy now?"

"Yes, extremely," Akio laughed. "But, that still didn't answer my question."

"R-right..." Ryuko gulped and stepped forwards. "W-well, I was thinking... You're always the one doing the gushy and cheesy

things... so I thought... maybe I could..."

Her words were coming out *painfully* slow. Akio's heart was beating a mile a minute at this point. The poor boy could hardly wait for her to finish her damned sentence.

"Are you really going to make me say it, damn it?!"

"Why yes, yes I was."

Ryuko stomped her foot and slapped her cheeks a few times, earning an amused chuckle from Akio.

"Okay. I can do this. I got this."

She cleared her throat one more time. Her words said one thing, but the growing blush in her cheeks told a different story.

"I was thinking... that maybe we could dance a little?" she asked hopefully. "I-It's been a while."

Akio stared at her dumbfounded.

"Who are you and what have you done with Ryuko?"

"H-hey!" she exclaimed indignantly. "I can like girly stuff, too, can't I?"

"Are you insinuating that I like girly things?" Akio raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, duh."

"Fair enough," he laughed and offered her his hand. "Alright, then. It has been a while. Why not?"

Ryuko grinned and nodded.

The two took each other's hands and began to move, just like they did for the first time so many days ago.

It was nice. She was right, it had been a while since they last done this. He had almost forgot what it felt like to hold her hands in his as they strutted around a room. Her choice in attire made it a little hard to keep focus, but the music in the background helped him keep his teenage hormones in check.

Their movements were a little awkward, but unlike before, Ryuko was a little more sure of herself. They were also moving at a snail's pace as they stepped in unison around the room, which also helped.

Akio's smile strained as he thought back to the first time the two had danced like this. It was the day after the Ryuko's fight with the Elite Four and Nui Harime. The day that she had nearly lost control and had been swallowed completely by Senketsu. That had been... a hard day. He had nearly lost her forever.

He had nearly lost everything.

Thinking about the past left a bitter taste in Akio's mouth.

"So, what do you think of Satsuki's taste in music?"

"Hm?" Akio blinked, looking down at his partner who had been staring up at him.

"The music. I like songs with a little more... punch. What do you think?"

"Oh. Well, I've always pegged Satsuki as more of a classical music enthusiast, but I guess I can't say I'm surprised by her choice of jazz. It's not bad. The candles are a nice touch, too."

"Yeah, my new sister is full of surprises," Ryuko grumbled, blushing slightly. "She forced those on me, you know. I-In case the power went out."

Akio laughed.

"Sure, sure. Let's go with that. It was all *Satsuki* 's idea."

Ryuko mumbled something about "a no-good smartass" under her breath, causing him to laugh even harder.

After that, the two fell into a comfortable silence, both content to just be close to the other.

"You know," Akio spoke, breaking the silence. "You continue to surprise me, Ryuko Matoi."

"Hm?" she looked up at him, quirking an eyebrow.

"When I met you a little over a year ago, I'd never imagine we'd be here together like this," Akio grinned. "I'd sooner think we'd start throwing punches instead of dancing."

"Ugh, don't remind me."

Akio frowned, caught off guard.

"What do you mean?"

Ryuko avoided his gaze, suddenly growing quiet. Akio waited patiently until she finally opened her mouth again.

"I don't wanna become like my past self again," she murmured. "Now that we're finally done fighting I just wanna... be me, you know? Leave the Kanto Vagabond behind and just be Ryuko Matoi for once."

"I see. You know, I didn't think you had it in you to be so poetic."

Ryuko stomped on his foot.

"Ow!" Akio yelped and giggled. "In all seriousness, I think that's a noble pursuit you have, Matoi."

Ryuko returned the smile for a split second, but it disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared.

"What's wrong?" Akio asked, concern seeping into his tone.

"I've been thinking about the past a lot actually, and I realized something," Ryuko said. "Do you know why I was able to be like that back then?"

Akio tilted his head to the side, shaking it slightly.

"It's because I knew you were right behind me, always backing me up," Ryuko replied quietly, lowering her head. "I knew I could take on the Elite Four, Satsuki, or Ragyo because I knew you'd always be there, waiting to patch me up or give me a pep talk when the fighting was done."

The mood changed as the two slowly came to a stop, their hands holding the other's as they simply stood there motionlessly in the dark room.

"I felt the same, you know," Akio said, squeezing her hand.

"I know, but it was different."

"How so?"

Breaking his hold on her hand, he pushed a stray strand of hair away to get a better look at her. Both of her blue eyes were cloudy with thought, her teeth biting at her bottom lip.

He had never seen her look so... pensive before.

"It felt like you always had the right things to say, ya know?" Ryuko whispered. "I just bumbled around with the subtlety of a bull in a china shop, but you? You always knew how to cheer me up."

"That's only because I didn't have your strength," Akio said softly. "You could duke it out with the best of them. I just couldn't. A lot of the time, being your support was all I could do."

"Yeah, but I don't think you know how much that meant to me. And now..."

Ryuko raised her head, her eyes burning with a fiery passion. It was a look he was very familiar with.

"And now it's my turn to return the favor."

Akio's eyebrows raised. *Return the...?*

Ryuko pushed her weight against him to force him to move. The two began to dance around the room once more, however this time at a quicker, steadier pace.

For the first time, he followed her pace. For the first time in their little dancing sessions, Ryuko had taken the lead.

"You see, Ryuko, you always have to keep your feet moving, and have confidence in those movements," Ryuko smiled as she spoke in a masculine voice, giving her best Akio impersonation. "You have to believe enough in yourself that you won't make the wrong step and stumble."

Akio remembered that day vividly... It was one of his favorite memories with her.

Her smile grew warmer as her hand tightened around his.

"And even if you fall down and stumble, a good partner will always make sure you get back on your feet and keep moving.' Do you remember dropping that line on me?"

"Of course I do," he mumbled. "But, why bring it up now?"

"Because..." Ryuko faltered momentarily before regaining steam. "It's time for me to be the guy that's dropping lines like that. It's time for me to be that partner."

Ryuko took a deep breath before continuing.

"That meeting you were supposed to have with Satsuki today? I set that up."

Akio furrowed his brow in confusion. What did that have to do with this?

"I'm not following you..."

"I don't know if you know this, but Jakuzure's father is apparently some bigwig doctor over in Osaka," she continued. "He's a pretty successful... therapist."

His eyes widened as the pieces fell into place.

"I had Satsuki get Jakuzure to contact him. He said he would see both you and Akiko free of charge."

Akio's feet slowly came to a stop.

Ryuko looked up at him, frowning slightly.

"I-it's just, I know it's been hard on you lately," she stammered. "With everything that happened, I'm worried about you. *We're* all worried about you. I-I just thought, maybe if there was someone you could talk to, someone that knew what they were doing, it might help?"

Akio dropped her hands as if they hurt to touch, his arms dropping limply back to his sides.

A therapist?

He was happy to send his sister to go see one. She probably could use it. But, himself?

... They're all worried about me.

"Look, I know I overstepped my bounds, and if you don't want to-"

"No," Akio cut her off. "No, you didn't overstep my bounds. I'll... I'll go."

"What? You will?" Ryuko blinked.

"Yeah, of course," Akio's lips twisted into a mirthless smile. "It's just..."

Akio sighed and shook his head, collapsing onto a nearby chair. He rested his elbow on his knee and his forehead in his hand.

... *A therapist...*

The thought had never occurred to him to seek professional help to get him out of this... funk he had been in as of late. Akio knew as well as everyone else that he hadn't been himself the past few months. Of course, the loss of his parents played a big part of that, but he was slowly coming to terms with that. What had happened had happened. There was nothing he could have done differently to get a different result. Everyone else had already known that, but Akio himself was finally starting to realize that as well.

"I know I've been different since *that* day," Akio mumbled, his eyes trained on the floor. "I tried to work through it. I really did."

Akio hung his head between his legs.

"But, that strength I used to have... I just can't seem to get it back. I feel like this broken shell of the man I used to be."

Ryuko frowned and stepped forwards, kneeling down in front of him.

"What you went through... It'd be tough on anyone, Akio."

"It's not even about that anymore," Akio continued. "I've... I've come to terms with it."

"Then what is it?" Ryuko asked.

He motioned to the surrounding room.

"It's *this*. I'm not ready for *this*, Ryuko!! I'm not ready to be Akiko's guardian. There are some days I'm so worried that I can't even sleep, let alone eat."

Akio sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"But, I have to be strong, because it's not just about me anymore. She deserves a big brother that can give her everything, and I'm just so scared that I can't."

"What are you talking about?" Ryuko scoffed and slapped his knee. "You've done a great job with Akiko. She's lucky to have you."

"Is she, though?" Akio frowned and met her eyes. "I mean, I have no clue what I'm doing. I don't know how to be that little girl's parent! I happily sent her off yesterday just so I could have some time alone. Hell, I couldn't even remember her celebration dinner, and I planned the damn thing!"

"Akio, people make mistakes. It happens."

"It shouldn't. Not from me, not for her," he said firmly. "Did you know I had to carry her piggy back half-way across town that day? If it wasn't for Nonon, I probably would have passed out on the side of the road."

Akio shook his head, his expression filled with self-loathing.

"What if it happens again? Except this time, it's something more important. What if it's her first day of school? A parent-teacher conference? A doctor's appointment? A dentist appointment? God, there's just so many things! I haven't even started university yet, and I can hardly..."

He closed his eyes. Akio couldn't finish that sentence. It made him sick to his stomach to think about how he would probably have to put

down his entire life, and even then, he wouldn't make half the parent that her actual parents would have.

It was around this time in his thought process that Akio's thoughts began to... change. Maybe Akiko shouldn't live with him... Maybe he should put her up for adoption. Let an actual family take her. She'd probably be better off in the long run.

It was when he had these thoughts that he truly, truly hated every fiber of his being.

"Hey."

Akio opened his eyes to see Ryuko's only a few inches from his own. Despite the seriousness of the conversation, she was smiling easily, as if everything he had just said-

Then she slapped him in the head.

Hard.

Akio yelped and nearly jumped out of his seat.

"Hey?! What's the hell?!"

"You really are an idiot, you know that?" Ryuko huffed, placing her hands on her hips. "You act like you're in this thing alone."

The boy opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out. He just stared dumbly at her.

"I mean, you've got the Mankanshokus. I'm sure they'd babysit her or take her places. You've got Mikisugi. I still think that guy is a creep, but I'm sure he'd help out. You even have Satsuki and her bunch of goons. I mean, could you imagine the Iron Giant taking her to school? No one would dare lay a finger on that girl's head!"

Akio slowly began to smile. It was rather amusing thinking about Ira Gamagoori driving Akiko to school.

"And you just let me take care of the teacher conferences. If those idiots say so much as one bad thing about her, I'll kick their asses."

He tried to hold it back, but he couldn't help but snort. Beating up a smarmy teacher sounded exactly like something she might do.

"See? It won't be too hard," Ryuko grinned and ruffled his hair. "I mean, yeah, things will never be how they were, but that doesn't have to be a bad thing."

It... It doesn't have to be a bad thing.

Ryuko's face began to go blurry as unshed tears flooded his vision. He blinked a few times to fight them back and swallowed the lump in his throat. Her words reverberated in his head over and over again.

Akio smiled, not caring that a single tear had rolled down his cheek.

"You should give yourself more credit," he said, taking her hands in his. "You're pretty damn good at this cheesy, gooey stuff."

Ryuko smirked and squeezed his hands.

"Hey, I learned from the best."

Akio laughed and nodded. He supposed he did have a propensity to do that.

"We'll go see Nonon's father. I'll make sure of it."

"Good. Because as it so happens, Osaka is also where me and the Mankanshokus will end up going. Satsuki and the others, too."

"Huh? Really?" Akio's eyes widened. "How'd that happen?"

"Well, originally it was just me and Mako's family. Then Satsuki said she wanted to be close by so we could give this sister thing a shot. Then of course, those four couldn't stray too far from the mother duckling."

The two laughed at that.

"It just kind of... happened," Ryuko shrugged, but she looked happy. "Which is why... I was hoping you'd come to."

"Like you'd even have to ask. Where you go, I go."

"I hope you don't mean that literally," she frowned. "Don't get me wrong, you're an all right guy and all, but trips to the bathroom are usually a one-person affair."

"Now look who's the no-good smartass."

Ryuko broke out into a fit of laughter, shortly followed by Akio.

After a few seconds, the two eventually settled down.

Akio squeezed her hands once again, marveling in the fact that they seemed to fit his just perfectly.

"I love you, you know that?"

"I know. And I-"

She reached out and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him into an embrace. Resting her chin on his shoulder, she perched her lips close to his ear.

"I think you're okay, I guess. Maybe a little clingy."

Akio growled and pinched her ribs.

"H-hey!" Ryuko protested, but her shoulders shook with laughter. "D-Don't d-do that! I'm ticklish you f-f-fucker!"

"This is your divine retribution."

Akio doubled his efforts on the tickling.

"W-Whahaha! Wh-what d-does that ev-even mean?!"

"I won't stop until you say it back!"

"Hahaha! Hahahahaha!" Ryuko squirmed in his grip, smacking at his back halfheartedly. "Y-You'll hahaha have to do b-better th-than that!"

"What are you gonna do? Slap- Woah!"

Ryuko let her weight fall towards the floor, pulling Akio down with her.

The two hit the ground with a rather loud thud, but neither seemed to mind. Both were laughing too hard to care.

The next day...

Akio's eyes fluttered open, the white ceiling of the apartment slowly coming into focus. He was sprawled out over his bed, snuggled up between a mound of pillows, a mess of blankets, and his drooling girlfriend.

"Ahhh..."

He yawned and rubbed his forearm against his heavy eyes. When he opened them again, he looked over at his alarm clock. It was only eight in the morning.

"No wonder I'm so tired," he yawned and settled back into his bed.

With a gentle smile on his face, he looked down at the slumbering face of Ryuko laying on his bare chest. One of her arms was draped across his midsection protectively, pulling him into basically a bear hug. Her mouth was slightly agape as she breathed slowly in and out, a bit of drool escaping the corner of her lips.

"Gross," Akio mumbled, but he didn't really matter. Compared to what they did the night before, a little bit of drool was nothing.

... The night before. He felt his entire face heat up as he recalled just how their night had ended.

Akio groaned and hid his blush in the crook of his arm. He can't believe he did *that*... that *they* did *that* .

He had never left himself so open like that... so vulnerable. He had let Ryuko see all of him, and she had done the same. Never in his wildest dreams that he thought he'd get to experience something so unbelievably amazing and frightening at the same time. It felt like a dream. He had never felt closer to her.

"... Heh. Hehehehe."

Akio began to laugh quietly, his shoulders shaking. He had to cover his mouth with his arm to not laugh out loud.

"What's so funny?"

He cursed silently and glanced down at Ryuko, who was watching him with one open eye. Part of him hoped he could watch her sleep for a brief moment before she woke up, but it looked like that plan was shot.

"Nothing," Akio sighed happily and wrapped his arms around her. "I'm just happy, is all."

"You should be," Ryuko grumbled, pushing herself further into the bed as she readjusted. "Taking advantage of a maiden like that. For shame."

"Hey now," he smirked at her. "You were the one that brought the candles. You knew exactly what you were getting in to."

"Like I said, Satsuki gave those to me in case the power went out," Ryuko glared at him.

"Then, why did you light them beforehand?"

"I-I just thought I should light 'em while we still had power, is all."

"Hmhm, hmhm. Did you read about that in that book of yours, too?"

"God, you're the worst."

Akio threw his head back and laughed.

"Consider this payback for suplexing me on to the floor."

"Hey, you started it. What did you think what happen when you started tickling me?"

Akio's grin turned devilish.

"Maybe this."

Ryuko blushed and stared blankly at him before promptly hiding her face in his shoulder.

"I bet you think you're sooo smooth, don't you?"

"I had to be if I won you over."

"Hey, you did not 'win' me over," Ryuko corrected indignantly. "It's the other way around."

Akio rubbed the back of her neck, using his other hand to brush away her hair.

"Yeah, you're right about that."

Ryuko peeked up at him, the hints of her blush coloring her cheeks.

Just as quickly, she hid her face again, mumbling something about a "no-good, smooth smartass."

Hey, it was an upgrade from a no-good smartass.

Akio continued to rub the back of her neck with his thumb, thinking back on the night before. His lips slowly curved downwards as a thought occurred to him.

"Hey, about last night..."

Ryuko gave a noncommittal hum, not bothering to lift her head from her makeshift pillow.

"I, uh, I hope I didn't cross the line," Akio fumbled over his words, a blush rising to his own cheeks now. "Things happened... kind of fast. I didn't stop to ask if you were ready."

Ryuko remained silent, neither moving nor lifting her head to look up at him.

Worry began to gnaw at his heart. Maybe he had taken things too fast? They had been dating for awhile now, and had even slept in the same bed dozens of times, so he just assumed that the next logical step would be... But, now he was doubting himself. Doing *that* for the first time was a big deal. Maybe he should have-

"Of course, I was ready, you idiot," Ryuko murmured. "I just didn't know if you were."

"Oh, I absolutely was."

Ryuko lifted her head, giving him a pointed stare.

"Pervert," she said and went back to hiding her face in his chest.

Akio opened his mouth to protest, but when he stopped to think about it...

"Okay. Yeah, maybe."

He could hear a stifled giggle come from Ryuko, her shoulders shaking against him with silent laughter. After a moment, Akio joined in.

Sighing once the laughter had stopped, Akio let his head rest against the pillow beneath him and turned towards the window near the bed. The pitter-pattering of rain pelting the window could still be heard and seen, but it seemed like the thunder had all but stopped.

"... Hey," Akio broke the silence, not bothering to take his eyes away from the rain. "What happens now?"

Ryuko hugged him a little tighter, a light purr escaping her throat.

"Whatever we want."

Akio smiled and closed his eyes.

"I like the sound of that."

And there you have it!

I had a boat load of fun writing this chapter. After reading the TV Tropes page, I knew exactly what I wanted to do with this chapter:

Swap roles.

A lot of times in Before My Body is Dry, after some big ordeal, it was usually Akio the one that cheered up Ryuko. Or Akio was the one that did some romantic gesture, because let's be honest, Ryuko doesn't scream "romantic." So, I decided I wanted to have them swap places and have the shoe be on the other foot.

Lemme tell ya, it felt surreal writing Ryuko this chapter. It was hard to tread the line between her character, and OOC. The candles thing was kind of a spur of the moment idea. I've been going back and forth on if her character at this point in the story would do something so... cheesy, but I couldn't help myself.

That was for me, guys. The prospect of Akio teasing her for lighting candles was too much fun for me to not write.

And hey, the main point of this chapter is for the two main characters to show their vulnerabilities to one another, so I took a shot with it.

I took another chance this chapter with something else a little more... saucy, but I'll leave that up to the imagination.

Anyways, thanks for reading guys! I have a general outline of what I want the next three and final chapters to look like. The next two will cover the OVA, while the final chapter will be a seriously special treat. Look forward to it!

Also, to my guest reviewer and fellow writer Lightning, good luck on your story! I really enjoyed it, so I do hope to see it again soon!

See you all next time!